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TO EAT OR NOT TO EAT: TOWARDS A FUNCTIONAL DEFINITION OF 'FOOD TABOO'

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Abstract: *Several studies have explored the close affinity between religion and food. It is evident from such studies that food plays a ritual role in most world religions. On the social level, food creates group identity and offers reasons for group interaction. Studies have also shown that food preferences are culture-specific. As a result, nearly all societies have rules on what may or may not be consumed. This selection and/or rejection of food substances have been described by many as 'food taboo'. Nonetheless, the term in its strictest sense may present some conceptual challenges, and thus require some considerable review. This paper reviews the shades of meaning of the concept of 'food taboo' and the difficulty it poses in food discourse within the broad spectrum of religion. In the main, the paper provides a functional definition of 'food taboo' but proposes a shift in paradigm from merely considering the prohibitions associated with food to an exploration of the guiding principles underlying food conduct which may be termed 'food ethics.'*

Keywords: Food Ethics, Food Taboo, Functional, Religion

Background

> No other fundamental aspect of our behaviour as species except sexuality is so encumbered by *ideas* as eating; the entanglements of food with religion, with both belief and sociality, are particularly striking.[1]

In many cultures, there is a clear relationship between religion and food practices. Food plays a ritual role in all of the world's religions.[2] Religious centres serve as a preserve of certain foods. Examples of

[1] Sidney W. Mintz Mintz, S. W. (1985). *Sweetness and Power* (New York: Viking-Penguin, 1985); cf. A. W. Logue, *The Psychology of Eating and Drinking*, 3rd ed. (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2004), 87.

[2] D. Norman Matsumoto, *Culture and Psychology* (Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1996).

such religious preservation and control of food practices abound in the history of the Buddhist and Christian monastic traditions respectively. Certain food practices were preserved at such centres because they were often associated with religious rituals or ceremonies. Monks had specific food items to depend on and they preserved certain traditions associated with eating. They also maintained the cultivation of the foodstuff that constituted the mainstay of the people; Christian monasteries in Europe kept particular herbs, grew olives and grapes and had some of the best wineries.[3] Such religious institutions also kept rules that governed what was to be eaten at a given time of the year, how much of it and sometimes even the manner of preparation. The example of Christian monasteries is revealing. They ate fish on Fridays and measured the quantity of sugar one may add to sweeten foods in the season of Lent.

Food, equally, occupies an important space in indigenous communities. Mealtimes are avenues for deepening a sense of togetherness. The act of food sharing has always been associated with religious celebrations. Indeed, the ethical values associated with food habits in indigenous societies are quite revealing. For example, in most African communities including Ghana, specific foods are prepared during festivals by special persons who must follow specific instructions. The preparation of *oto* or yam *fufu* during the Odwira festival of the Asante people of Ghana may be a point of reference. On many occasions, the ingredients used in the preparation were carefully selected to achieve a specific purpose, that is, for religious and health purposes. Nonetheless, studies have shown that food preferences are culture-specific. What may be consumed in one society may be abhorred in another. In effect, a society may not classify everything in its environment as food, often for religious reasons.

This selection or rejection of food substances is what many scholars describe as 'food taboos.' However, the term in its strictest sense presents some conceptual challenges, which require a review. This paper explores the various shades of meaning the concept 'food taboo' presents and the difficulty it poses in food discourse within the broad spectrum of religion. In the main, the paper provides a functional

[3] A. Jotischky, *A Hermit's Cookbook: Monks, Food and Fasting in the Middle Ages*. London and New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011).

definition of 'food taboo' but proposes a shift in paradigm from merely considering the prohibitions associated with food to an exploration of the guiding principles underlying food conduct which may be termed 'food ethics.' This paper is significant to the extent that it proposes a paradigm for interpreting food taboos.

Theoretical Framework

Food habits have been approached from different perspectives. The predominant body of literature tends towards vegetarianism,[4] food and health, food habits and environmental protection, preservation of species,[5] food symbolism,[6] food as an art and food in relation to religious beliefs.[7] This study posits that there is a strong affinity between religion and food, and is, therefore, more closely related to theories that deal with restrictions that religion may place on food such as Douglas's theories on the relationships between food and purity and the social meanings of Hebrew dietary laws. She posits that rules governing food (dietary laws) have implications on a group's consciousness as to who they are. Consequently, it creates a marked difference between them and others.[8] The view of McGowan is that dietary rules help to achieve the spiritual goals of religious communities.[9] Thus there is sufficient evidence that religion usually plays an important role in preserving the food values and practices of a people. The reasons adduced for some food practices may change over time, but

[4] D. Maurer, *Vegetarianism: Movement or Moment*? (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002).

[5] D. R. McDonald, "Food Taboos: A Primitive Environmental Protection Agency," *Anthropos 72* (1977), 734-748; A. Begossi, "Food Taboos at Buzios Island (Brazil): Their Significance and Relation to Folk Medicine," *Journal of Ethnobiology* 12, no. 1 (1992): 117-139; R. Patnaik, "Ecology of Food Taboos and Fishing Technology: A Complex System of Resource Partitioning among Jalari of North Coast Andhra Pradesh," *The Anthropologist* 9, no. 2 (2007): 125-135.

[6] C. W. Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (California: University of California Press, 1987).

[7] V. B. Meyer-Rochow, **"**Food Taboos: Their Origins and Purposes," *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine* 5 (2009); http://www.ebscohost.com [Accessed on November 25, 2020]; J. Coveney, *Food, Morals and Meaning: The Pleasure and Anxiety of Eating*, 2nd ed. (London – New York: Routledge, 2006); G. F. Snyder, *Inculturation of the Jesus Tradition* (Norcross, GA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 11-13.

[8] Mary Douglas, "Taboo," in *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural*, ed. J. E. Myers and A. C. Lehmann, 5th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), 68-69.

[9] Cf. A. Deaton and J. Drèze, "Nutrition in India: Facts and Interprétations," *Economic and Political Weekly* 44 (2009): 42-65.

critical historical surveys usually reveal the original religious roots of some of the rules governing a people's food habits. This study engages existing literature on the subject and extrapolates, by inference, implications for contemporary food discourse.

Perspectives on Food

The point has been made that the subject of food has been studied from various perspectives. The predominant body of literature on food leans towards issues of vegetarianism, nutrition and health, food symbolism, and food taboos just to mention a few. However, these areas of study, which often constitute the main point of departure in food discourse, fall under three main disciplines namely Anthropology, Sociology, and Religion[10] although there are works that treat just the physiological or chemical components of food[11] and even the oral processing of food.[12] For relevance, and to place this study in context, these perspectives are considered.

Anthropological Perspectives of Food

Anthropological interest in food discourse has a long history.[13] However, there seem to have been some expansion and changes in anthropological studies over the last three decades.[14] Du Bois and Mintz sought to document the various anthropological studies on food habits.[15] The focus of these scholars was to identify the major areas of interest to food anthropologists. According to them, anthropological interest in food came about by a distinctive attempt to describe food within a cultural context. Thus for earlier anthropologists, studying a group of people's way of life also implied studying how they acquired and used food.[16] It is convenient therefore to say that anthropological studies on food have been to investigate the origins of food, food habits as well as the symbolic/cultural meanings of food to a group.

[10] S. W. Mintz and C. Du Bois, "The Anthropology of Food and Eating," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31 (2002): 99-119; F. H. Cushing, *Zuni breadstuff* (New York: Museum of American Indian Heye Foundation, 1974). G. E. Pence, ed. *The Ethics of Food: A Reader for the 21st Century* (Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield, 2002).
[11] Mintz and Du Bois, "The Anthropology of Food," 99-119.
[12] S. W. Mintz, "Devouring Objects of Study: Food and Fieldwork," *Open Anthropology Cooperative Press* (2011); www.openanthcoop.net/press [Accessed on January 13, 2020].
[13] Mintz and Du Bois, "The Anthropology of Food," 99-119.
[14] Mintz, "Devouring Objects of Study."
[15] Mintz and Du Bois, "The Anthropology of Food," 99-119.
[16] Mintz, "Devouring Objects of Study."

Cushing and Boa are examples of such works which have examined the cultural aspects of food.[17] Both works point to the fact that conducts around food did not only take place within the society, but those food activities were also considered important for the survival of a group's culture. Cushing demonstrates how food featured prominently in the ceremonies in society by tracing the origin of corn and examining its importance in the life of a society known as Zuni. According to the author, corn forms an integral aspect of Zuni life including the industrial, mythological and particularly religious life of the people.[18] He argues that in Zuni mythology, five things are considered necessary for the survival of Indian society. These include the sun (considered to be the father of all), the earth (considered to be the mother of men), water (considered to be the grandfather), fire (considered as the grandmother) and corn (which is considered to be one's brothers and sisters).

Several other works following Cushing have explored the importance of corn. For example, Warman[19] provides a useful historical development of corn including the biology and economy of the crop, its dissemination over space and time as well as its widespread adoption.[20] Warman details corn's resilience to a variety of environmental conditions and the many uses to which corn can be put. The author maintains that corn sustained the slave trade in Africa as slave merchants depended on it to feed slaves earmarked for the new world. Gonzalez has criticized Warman's work for its reliance on an approach which leans towards political economy, similar in many respect, to the works of Mintz and Wolf to the exclusion of ethnography.[21] Nonetheless, to the extent that Warman provides a detailed historical development of corn and its impact on colonialism, slavery and capital accumulation, his work is an important source of reference in food discourse.

[17] Cushing, *Zuni Breadstuff*.
[18] Cushing, *Zuni Breadstuff*.
[19] A. Warman, *Corn and capitalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).
[20] D. McCreery, "Arturo Warman, Corn & Capitalism: How a Botanical Bastard Grew to Global Dominance," *E.I.A.L.* 16, no. 1 (2005): 181-182).
[21] González, "Corn & Capitalism," 202-204; cf. S. W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power* (New York: Viking-Penguin, 1985) and Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

In many African cultures and particularly Ghana, corn (maize) is a staple food which features prominently in daily dishes in many homes. Corn has several uses and can be used for many types of foods.[22] For example, a popular Ghanaian breakfast meal known as *kooko* is either made from corn or millet. The ritual significance of corn in Ghana is well acknowledged. Among some Ghanaian groups like the Akan, indigenous religious rules allow for *pito* (a native beer brewed from fermented corn or millet) or corn flour mixed with water to be used for libation purposes.[23] The main meal during the *Homowo* festival of the Ga people is *kpokpoi*, which is made from corn.[24]

The focus of some other anthropological works has been to establish a relationship between food and identity/power. In what seems like a field experience, Mintz shares his experiences in a work he did among the community on the Southern Coast of Puerto Rico which resulted in his famous book *Sweetness and Power*.[25] Mintz argues that although the book is on sugar, it was rather an attempt to examine the rise of capitalism in the West.[26] The author explains that much of the social, as well as the economic fabric of the Puerto Rican society, depended on sugar production but it indirectly formed the basis of some form of social class. Indeed the book discusses how 'holders of power' in the West established themselves outside Europe and related with the labouring classes in other parts of the world.[27] The social and economic class system came to be established, individuals within the society coined their identity from what they consumed. Several other scholars following Sidney Mintz have reiterated the point about how food creates identity in society. In discussing this, Pence and Bourdieu become relevant.[28] For example, in Pence's own words,

[22] M. L. Morris, R. Tripp and A. A. Dankyi, "Adoption and Impacts of Improved Maize Production Technology. A case study of the Ghana Grains Development Project," *Economics Program Paper* 99, no. 1 (1999); http://fsg.afre.msu.edu/zambia/sweet/CIMMYT_Ghana_maize_adoption_impact.pdf [Accessed on January 25, 2020].

[23] P. Sarpong, *Ghana in retrospect: Some aspects of Ghanaian culture*. Tema, Ghana: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1974).

[24] R.V. Dijk, "Contesting Silence: The Ban on Drumming and the Musical Politics of Pentecostalism in Ghana," *Ghana Studies* 4 (2001): 31-64.

[25] Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*.

[26] S. W. Mintz, "Devouring Objects of Study."

[27] Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 5.

[28] G. E. Pence, ed. *The Ethics of Food: A Reader for the 21st Century* (Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield, 2002); P. Bourdieu, "What Makes a Social Class? On the Theoretical and Practical Existence of Groups," *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 32 (1987): 1-17.

> The decisions we make about food define who we have been, who we are now and who we want to become. How we make those choices says much about our values, our relationship to those who produced our food and the kind of world we want.[29]

Although this study does not attempt an investigation into the powerful and the powerless in society, Mintz points to the fact that anthropologists have also been concerned about the various impacts of food on humans because of their identity.[30]

One cannot also lose sight of the gender dimension on the conduct around food. In Counihan's *Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning and Power*, we observe a correlation between gender and food habits. Counihan argues that food habits have implications for gender construction. In her view, people, particularly males and female's food habits influence their own perception about their roles as gender species.[31]

In summary, we have seen that the interest of scholars in the field of anthropology has been to understand people's culture through food. In effect, what people consume as food reflects the food found in their immediate environment.

Sociological Perspectives of Food

Sociological studies concerning food, food habits as well as food choices began recently.[32] Indeed, until the turn of the 1990s, there were very little works on food within the field of sociology.[33] Until 1992, even the 'British Sociological Association' did not see the need to devote attention to study the social implications of food.[34] Early writers focused on the ways in which food and dietary habits influence

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[29] Pence, *The Ethics of Food*, vii.
[30] Mintz, *Sweetness and Power.*
[31] C.M. Counihan, *The Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning and Power* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999).
[32] A. Murcott, "The BSA and the Emergence of a Sociology of Food: A Personal View," *Sociological Research Online*; www.socresonline.org.uk/16/3/14.html. [Accessed on January 23, 2021]; S. Mennell, A. Murcott and A. van Otterloo, *The* Sociology *of Food: Diet, Eating and Culture* (London: Sage, 1992); A. Murcott, ed., *The Sociology of Food and Eating* (Aldershot: Gower, 1983).
[33] R. Ceccarini "Food Studies and Sociology: A Review Focusing on Japan," *AGLOS* 117, no. 1 (2010).
[34] Murcott, "The BSA," 1.

human relationships and societal conditions.[35] There are also sociological studies on food, which examine the social chain of food production, distribution and consumption.[36] However, it would seem that the major factor of influence causing a rise in food interest among sociologists is the focus on consumption, gender and policy issues.[37] Indeed, the bulk of the literature, which examines the sociological perspectives of food, tends also to give attention to food in relation to nutrition and public health. Some of the works worth mentioning under this theme include Mennell, Murcott and Sherwood.[38]

For scholars like Ceccarini sociological interest in food and eating stems from the fact that food creates social identity. But according to this author, interest did not become visible until recently. She explains that the major fact accounting for this is that eating has always been taken for granted because it is a daily routine. Moreover, food as a topic for discussion has been the focus of other disciplines such as psychology which for a long time investigated eating disorders among people.[39] As mentioned earlier, anthropologists have long discussed the origins of a people's food habits. Ceccarini argues that in order to understand people's food habits, it is imperative to pay attention to the culture of the group. In tracing the culture, one must focus on the tangible, visible and audible aspects of culture. The cultural objects can be understood against history.

Christian Coff's *The Taste for Ethics: An Ethic of Food Consumption* also becomes important as it deals with the social meaning of food. Coff notes that food habits have always had communal sense and that though food is usually eaten on the individual level, the social meanings are never left out. He claims that during the shared meal period, people transcend beyond their individualities and are transformed into a social interaction.[40] In the author's view, the social meal creates the sense of the same blood, same flesh among the eaters. This, he argues,

[35] S. Sherwood, "Sociology of Food and Eating: Implications for Action for the Elderly," *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 26, no. 10 (1973): 1108.
[36] J. B. Germov and L. T. Williams "Sociology of Food and Nutrition: The Social Appetite," (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2004), 5.
[37] A. Beardsworth and T. Keil, *Sociology on the Menu: An Invitation to the Study of Food and Society* (London: Routledge, 1997); Mennell, Murcott and van Otterloo, *The* Sociology *of Food.*
[38] S. Mennell, *All Manners of Food*, Oxford: Blackwell (1985), Murcott, ed., *The Sociology of Food*; Sherwood, "Sociology of Food."
[39] Ceccarini "Food Studies and Sociology," 2.
[40] C. Coff, *The Taste for Ethics: An Ethic of Food Consumption*, trans. E. Broadbridge (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), 4.

should be understood metaphorically. He explains that the ties of blood refer to the ties among the individuals in a community. In this way, social meal eliminates traces of what he calls 'egoism' and binds individuals together in a 'common identity.' Thus food creates a communal sense among a group and solidifies their bond of friendship. Coff remarks that eating, though "the lowest and the most egoistic common denominator, it is the most fundamental of all human activities and that individuality and sociality are reconciled in the meal."[41] In an ethnographic study using the artic Inuit societies Coff claims that, in such societies, it is considered ethically wrong for one to show appreciation for a meal offered to him/her. He explains that the society sees it as the individual's right to share in a meal and therefore it is customary to divide among themselves the food or game that hunters bring home.

German sociologist, Simmel discussed similar ideas in 1910. Indeed, Coff dwells on Simmel in treating his theme of social meaning of food. Simmel argues that the social implications of food cannot be overlooked. According to him food habits have implications on social relations. In his view, food constitutes symbols for community and solidarity. The author remarks:

> Communal eating and drinking, which can even transform a mortal enemy into a friend for the Arab, unleashes an immense socializing power that allows us to overlook that one is not eating and drinking the same thing at all, but rather totally exclusive portions, and gives rise to the primitive notion that one is thereby creating common flesh and blood.[42]

Thus, by Simmel's comment, one observes that food promotes social interaction. Leslie Gofton summarises this idea by arguing that food does not only project cultural values but is also the basis for establishing and expressing social relations.[43]

For Nutch food shapes and maintains individual cultural identities. In his view, there is much truth in the maxim that "we are what we eat"

[41] Coff, *The Taste for Ethics*, 14-15.
[42] G. Simmel, *Sociology of the Meal*, in *Simmel on Culture*, ed. D. Frisby and M. Featherstone (London: Sage, 1910), 130.
[43] L. Gofton, "Bread to Biotechnology: Cultural Aspects of Food Ethics," in *Food Ethics*, ed. B. Mepham (London - New York: Routledge, 1996), 121-122.

than is usually acknowledged. In his view, food is "a function of culturally mediated relations to nature."[44] He argues that humans by their nature select objects they consider as food. This selection, according to him, is an interaction between nature and culture. The process of selecting, cooking and eating are "historical and cultural variables."[45] The author argues that food habits define humans and shows an intersection between "biology and culture, nature and society, the individual and social life."[46] This intersection of biology and culture underlines the ways of viewing aspects of nature as food. The implication is that food is the production of human interaction with the environments.[47]

This engagement with the environment affords humans two opportunities in food choice. The first opportunity, Nutch calls the 'unadulterated' and 'unadorned' foods such as honey, fruits, and vegetables among others. These food items are consumed directly with little alteration to their 'natural' state. The second opportunity involves processing and transforming food with technology. According to the author, all cultures are exposed to these opportunities, but available foods differ from culture to culture. Nutch thinks that this difference is what often creates "gastronomic culinary centrism." This view holds that one's cultural food habits are better than others. One can only conclude that food habits mark the boundaries of cultures.[48]

Nutch believes that humans need to recognize the importance of food to people as well as its centrality to individuals and cultures. In this regard, people must not only look at the processes of selection but also the social and cultural dynamics associated with food. Thus, depending on Nutch, there is sufficient reason to believe that apart from physiological needs, food also provides humans with their social needs and that social relations are established and maintained around food conduct. In his view, societies are identified by their food habits in two extremes of intimacy. One social element, which often makes visible

[44] F. Nutch, "Hard to Swallow: Reflections on the Sociology of Culinary Culture," *The Discourse of Sociological Practice* 8, no. 1 (2007), 39.
[45] Nutch, "Hard to Swallow," 39.
[46] Nutch, "Hard to Swallow," 39.
[47] J. Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (New York: The Free Press, 1973).
[48] D. R. Gabaccia, *We Are what we Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of the Americans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 8.

the issue of intimacy, is 'feast'. Feasts are often special occasions where people are united by foods and rituals.[49]

Religion and Food Practices

Religion and food are inseparable. Proof of this assertion is seen in the multiplicity of dietary laws that are found in nearly all religions or communities.[50] These religious dietary laws regulate communal 'food ethics' regarding the types of food one may eat, how it is prepared, who prepares it and even the manner of eating. As has already been indicated, Western monasteries have served as centres for the preservation of traditional food ethics. The implication is that religion has been and continues to be a variable for preserving a group of people's food practices. However, this assertion is considered misleading by some contemporary food scholars such as Coveney. Such scholars argue that religion has lost its hold on food practices which has now been taken over by science.[51]

Coveney for example is convinced that religion no longer has a role to play in people's food habits as well as their moral consciousness and that 'science now articulates the basis of our moral concerns'. Coveney is of the view that the growing interest in nutrition was chiefly motivated by what he calls 'moral panic' which shook the political spectrum of Britain and elsewhere about the effects of diet-related illness on the health and efficiency of the population. Indeed, in contemporary times, it would seem that much of what is chosen as food is partly determined by nutritional facts but that is not the only determining factor.[52] A careful search for a group of people's food practices would show that, one's urge to eat or not to eat a particular food is largely determined by a religious idea. For example, a Muslim may not eat pork because the Qur'an prohibits its consumption. A Buddhist may not eat the flesh of a cow because the animal is believed to be sacred.[53] It would therefore be misleading to think that science has taken over the role of religion completely in food choice. Religion

[49] Nutch, "Hard to Swallow," 41, 45.
[50] Meyer-Rochow, **"**Food Taboos."
[51] Coveney, *Food, Morals and Meaning.*
[52] Coveney, *Food, Morals and Meaning.*
[53] Meyer-Rochow, **"**Food Taboos."

continues to influence people's food habits and offers them ritual significance.

However, contemporary dietary discourses extend to cover health and fitness, longevity and spiritual relevance. For Turner, concerns about what to eat are dependent on the regard of others; what he calls the 'the looking glass self'.[54] Coveney therefore depends on Turner and proposes "a framework that modern dietary concerns, characterized by nutrition, function for modern subjects by providing an empirical understanding of the body, health and food through an elaboration of knowledge about nutrients, pathologies and disease…"[55] This concern about nutrition also provides for modern subjects an ethic, "…an askesis, which allows them to produce themselves as moral individuals with proper concerns for their bodies and their souls."[56]

Food is also believed to influence a spiritual discipline. Tryon argues that good diet is for a healthy body and "foundation laid for the building upon an excellent and accomplished person."[57] This view is also elaborated by George Cheyne who thinks that food that has not been characterized by an elaborate and unnecessary treatment has a lot of benefits to the body.[58] Cheyne's work is said to have influenced John Wesley who believed that health was greatly affected by passions. According to Wesley, right food should sit 'light and easy on the stomach' and that highly seasoned food is unwholesome. Thus, early Christians focused on eliminating seasonal pleasures associated with food which was the main method of religious discipline.

The works of 16th and 17th century writers on diet focused on the health of the body, the elimination of disease and the purity of soul. This theology of the body paved way for strict adherence to dietary practices. But during the 18th and 19th centuries, issues about the body and food changed. The focus, according to Coveney was now on the wholesomeness of body and diet.[59] One Sylvester Graham, a Presbyterian minister, focused on preaching about whole food. His major concerns centred on health and moral problems associated with the

[54] B. Turner, "Government of the Body: Medical Regimens and Rationalisation of Diet," *British Journal of Sociology* 33 (1982): 254-269.
[55] Coveney, *Food, Morals and Meaning,* 52.
[56] Coveney, *Food, Morals and Meaning*, 52.
[57] Coveney, *Food, Morals and Meaning*, 54;
[58] Cf. Coveney, *Food, Morals and Meaning*; Turner, "Government of the Body."
[59] Cf. Coveney, *Food, Morals and Meaning.*

consumption of meat. Meat was deemed to "excite vile tempers and habits" and spicy food was believed to ignite sexual appetite among people.[60]

According to Coveney, the Seventh Day Adventist movement which started in 1830 by William Miller had its message centered on "healthy, holy, happy" theology.[61] The dietary rules that formed the foundation of its teachings were believed to have been revealed to a founding member by name Ellen White on 21st May 1863 at a gathering near Battle Creek, Michigan. The list of items to be avoided included animal food especially meat from pigs- believed to cause decline of human race.[62] The vision was also against the intake of alcohol, tobacco, tea and coffee. These interdictions were to be a Christian's duty to care for the body as well as the soul. Maxwell describes the forbidden foods as "unwise food."[63]

From the foregoing emanates the view that there is a strong correlation between food and religion. Religion has been a fence around a group's food practices relative to what may be transported into sacred and profane spaces. The point has been made to the effect that what a group may select as food is not only dependent on environmental factors but, to a great extent, on their beliefs and values. Additionally, attitude to food have social implications as it creates identity and reveals a group's culture.

Food Taboo or Food Ethics? In search of a Definition

Thus far, it is possible to glean from the above that studies related to food often tend to discuss permissibility or non-permissibility of eating commonly termed as 'food taboo'. Nonetheless, this mere classification of permissibility or non-permissibility of food as the meaning of the term food taboo, may present some conceptual challenge as the term may be ambiguous in meaning. Here, we attempt to reveal this latent ambiguity associated with the term. In essence, we explore the

[60] Cf. Coveney, Food, Morals and Meaning, 56; H. Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).
[61] O. Maxwell, *Tell it to the World: The Story of the Seventh Day Adventists* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1977), 8.
[62] Maxwell, *Tell it to the World.*
[63] R. Deutsch, *New Nuts among the Berries* (Palo Alto: Bull, 1977); Cf. Coveney, *Food, Morals and Meaning*; Maxwell, *Tell it to the World*.

appropriateness of the term and propose a move towards a paradigm that leans towards the underlying principles that govern food conduct. In this regard we speak of the ethos of food practices. Such an approach (food ethics) does not limit the discourse to merely what is permissible or not permissible.

Taboo as a concept is not easily reducible as modern interpretations suggest.[64] Contemporary understanding of the term implies two contradictory views. On one hand it refers to that which is 'sacred' or 'consecrated.' On the other hand, it points to something 'forbidden' or 'dangerous.' In a sense, taboo refers to prohibitions regarding objects or persons. The term is of Polynesian origin and was first used by Captain Cook after his third voyage around the world.[65] Cook described the Islanders of Atui as people who acted cautiously. For this group, obedience was more important than seeking explanations to things. Thus, the term taboo was not "conspicuous in its use" and that the people lived it rather than explained it.[66]

The most common etymology of the term is *tabu* which means "unlawful and/or sacred" which implies that *taboo* is an Anglicized form of the word *tabu.*

Modern usage of the term presents a concept with religious underpinnings. However, Freud thinks that religious interpretation of the concept is an external imposition and a later addition to the concept. According to him, taboo as used by the Polynesians, had no basis in divine sanction. Freud seems to share similar thoughts with scholars like Wundt who argues that taboos predate religion. For Steiner, the term taboo is not easily reducible as to connote two meanings. He claims that there are no Polynesian words, which mean 'holy' as modern usage of the term connotes. Thus he states, "the distinction between prohibition and sacredness cannot be expressed in Polynesian terms…taboo is single,…not undifferentiated concept."[67]

Mead and Steiner argue that punishment for the violation of a taboo was intrinsic and automatic without any external mediation. Thus, the

[64] S. Freud, *Totem and Taboo* (London - New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950); Steiner, *Taboo*.
[65] Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 21; F. Steiner, *Taboo* (London: Penguin Books, 1956), 23.
[66] Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 23; W. Wundt, *Logik*, 3rd ed. (Stuttgart: Enke, 1956); Steiner, *Taboo*, 23.
[67] Steiner, *Taboo*, 34.

punishment was inherent in the violated taboo. It was later when the idea of gods and spirits emerged that penalty for violating a taboo assumed a divine nature. This brief conceptual explanation of the term taboo points to the fact that the concept is difficult to reduce into comprehensible forms. Out of this conceptual challenge emerges the question, how appropriate is the term food taboo?[68]

Food, in the minimal sense, may refer to any edible substance, either liquid or solid, which when consumed is expected to enhance growth and not cause harm to the body. It is the raw material of labour.[69] According to Bascom there are three main uses of food in all cultures. These are subsistence, trade and prestige. Food forms part of cultural tradition. Its role in human life is paramount. It is a source for pleasure, comfort and security. Food may also serve as a symbol of hospitality, social status, and religious significance. Human food habits regarding what to eat, how to prepare it, how to serve it, and even how to consume it have a bearing on specific group culture.[70] Thus, food habit is strictly a culture specific concept, as what may be eaten in one community may be abhorred by another.[71] The implication is that people who have the same cultural identity share the same food habits, while people of different cultures share different food habits.[72]

Elsewhere and depending on scholars like Freud, Steiner and Mead, it has been argued that it is difficult to think of a term as connoting meanings of what are nearly two extremes. Thus unless the context is sufficiently established, the term food taboo, if used in the generic sense, would appear too ambiguous a term to employ in any study that deals with food practices.[73] Besides, if one were to provide a working

[68] M. Mead, "Tabu," *The Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (London: Macmillan, 1937), 502-505; Steiner, *Taboo*; see also Freud, *Totem and Taboo*.
[69] B. Ezard, "Food and Language: An Ethno-linguistic Study in Tawala" (1980); http://www 01.sil.org/pacific/png/pubs/928474531015/Tawala_Ethno-linguistic_study.pdf [Accessed May 16, 2014];A. E. Crawley, "Food," in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. VI (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994).
[70] W. R. Bascom, "Ponapean Prestige Economy," in *Cultures of the Pacific*, ed. T. Harding and B. Wallace (New York: The Free Press, 1970), 88-93.
[71] A. P. Hartog, "Food Taboos," in *Encyclopedia of Food and Culture*, ed. S. H. Katz and W. W. Weaver (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2003).
[72] Cf. M. O. Ayeomoni, "Language, Food and Culture: Implications for Language Development and Expansion in Nigeria," *International Journal of Educational Research and Technology* 2, no. 2 (2011): 50-55.
[73] Freud, *Totem and Taboo*; Steiner, *Taboo*; Mead, "Tabu."

definition of food taboo, the closest point one could come to is a concept which denotes the application of rules regarding what may not be permitted as food as a result of its harmful and sacred nature. According to Meyer-Rochow, food taboo applies to humans only. He maintains that the term food taboo refers to 'prohibitions' to distinguish the deliberate avoidance of a food item for reasons other than simple dislike for food.[74] Indeed, prohibition may arise as a result of the danger a particular food may pose to health. However, studies have also shown that the cow is tabooed for consumption in the Indian society not because it is harmful but because it is considered a sacred animal.[75] Inferring from the above argument, one observes that it is not always the case that food is tabooed because of its harmful nature but also because of its sacred nature.

Nevertheless, what is even more confusing is that in some societies, motivation for consuming a certain food is also because it is sacred as for example milk and milk products in India.[76] The net effect is that Meyer-Rochow's definition of food taboo which limits the discourse to prohibitions is defective. As shown above, on one hand, food may be prohibited because it is sacred. On another hand, food may be consumed because it is sacred. Thus the term food taboo is not exhaustive of the ideas which govern food habits. We may equally encounter difficulties if food taboo is used within the meaning provided by Steiner. Steiner reminds us that the term taboo cannot have two meanings: i.e. sacred and forbidden. In his words as has already been alluded to, "the distinction between prohibition and sacredness cannot be expressed in Polynesian terms…taboo is single…not undifferentiated concept."[77] However, what is clear from the existing literature on food discourse is that scholars usually employ the term food taboo to refer to the guiding principles associated with food habits. In this regard the term food ethics is more preferred as that covers not just the superficial restrictions or permission to food but also the meanings a group may ascribe to food conduct. In what follows, we explore this paradigm further.

The term ethics has several interpretations. Many scholars accept as adequate the definitions that refer to the term as a set of standards of

[74] Meyer-Rochow, **"**Food Taboos."
[75] M. Harris, *Cannibals and Kings: The Origin of Cultures* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).
[76] Meyer-Rochow, **"**Food Taboos;" Patnaik, "Ecology of Food Taboos," 125-131.
[77] Steiner, *Taboo*, 34.

right or wrong conduct put forward by a group and imposed on all members. This set of principles outlines the limits to human behaviour. It is coined from the Greek *ethos* which means "cultural custom or habit."[78] The predominant body of literature often equate ethics to the term morality, an English rendition of the Latin *moralis*, which also means 'custom.' Nonetheless, some scholars distinguish between ethics and morality. For example, Appiah argues that whereas ethics deals with the study of a set of principles of behaviour, morality concerns itself with actual execution of those principles. For him, morality is simply ethics in practice. In this paper, our use of the term ethics identifies with the view that considers both terms as referring to the same phenomenon – cultural norms or customs. Thus instead of merely looking at the right food to consume or the wrong food to avoid, we are interested in examining also, the group's patterns of behavior, beliefs and values associated with food. This understanding suspends a strict theoretical approach to food habits.[79]

Nonetheless, it is remarkable that ethics extend beyond the concept of rightness or wrongness of conduct to include the study of values and guidelines underlying behavior. Thus, it is a way of life, which involves active engagement in the pursuit of a life consistent with a set of moral values. Appiah summarizes these ideas in his definition when he states that ethics is "a systematic analysis of a people's way of life, regarding the desire to do the good and the retraction from evil through the use of scientific principle."[80] This implies that every culture[81] has a pattern of life acquired from years of experience mainly through experimentation and selection. To this end, and particularly in view of the conceptual difficulty associated with the term 'food taboo,' we propose the term food ethics as an alternative concept which

[78] J. A. Boss, *Ethics for Life: A Text with Readings*, 4th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2008, 1-5; G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

[79] S. K. Appiah, *Africanness-Inculturation-Ethics: In Search of the Subject of Inculturated Christian Ethics* (Frankfurt-Berlin: Peter Lang, 2000).

[80] Boss, *Ethics for Life*; Appiah, *Africanness-Inculturation-Ethics*, 1.

[81] The meaning we ascribe to the concept of culture is premised on the definition provided by Matsumoto who defines culture as …the set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors shared by a group of people, but different for each individual, communicated from one generation to the next' (D. N. Matsumoto, *Culture and Psychology* (Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1996), 16. The net effect is that the shared beliefs and values create group identity which binds members of the group together.

adequately addresses food habits in a given society. Thus, while acknowledging that several interpretations exist,[82] the term food ethics ought to be understood as referring generally to the guiding principles underlying food and food habits in a society. This approach shifts focus from merely drawing a distinction between forbidden and permitted food in a given society.

Even if viewed from the moral perspective, the influence food has on morality is inescapable. Indeed, there is a relationship between food and morality. The preparation of food, its distribution, and consumption reflect the social and moral as well as beliefs and values of a society. Mealtimes are avenues for the socialization of persons into competent and appropriate members of a society. This is because these times ensure the production of sociality, morality, and local understandings of one's environment.[83] This implies that, food habits create self-consciousness among humans. As Kass summarises,

> We human beings delight in beauty and order… sociability and friendship… song and worship. And, as self-conscious beings, we especially crave self-understanding and knowledge of our place in the larger whole… The meal taken at table is the cultural form that enables us to respond simultaneously to all the dominant features of our world….[84]

Kass' argument points to the fact that food discourse hover around issues of morality and social relations. Indeed food may have sociocultural meanings for the people using the food (Kuhnlein and Receveur, 1996, p. 418)

Conclusion

The paper has shown that the term or concept of food taboo is difficult to discern. The ordinary meaning of the concept denotes prohibitions associated with food. Food prohibition may arise as a result of the danger a particular food may pose to health. However, studies have also shown that the cow is tabooed for consumption in the Indian society not because it is harmful but because it is considered a sacred

[82] See for example, Gofton, "Bread to Biotechnology," 121-122.
[83] E. Ochs and M. Shohet, "The Cultural Structuring of Mealtime Socialization," in *To Eat or not to Eat Meat: How Vegetarian Dietary Choices Influence our Social Lives*, ed. C. de Backer, M. Fisher, J. Dare and L. Costello (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).
[84] L. R. Kass, "Why the Dietary Laws?" *Commentary* 97, no. 6 (June, 1994): 42-47.

animal.[85] The inference one could make from the above is that it is not always the case that food is tabooed because of its harmful nature but also because of its sacred nature. Nevertheless, what is even more confusing is that in some societies, motivation for consuming a certain food is also because it is sacred as for example milk and milk products in India.[86] This conceptual difficulty requires a paradigm shift in which consideration is given to the underlying principles regarding a people's food habits. These guiding principles on food may be termed as 'food ethics.' This approach shifts focus from merely drawing a distinction between forbidden and permitted food in a given society Introduction

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[85] Harris, *Cannibals and Kings.*
[86] Meyer-Rochow, **"**Food Taboos;" Patnaik, "Ecology of Food Taboos," 125-131.