

II

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES ON ETHNOLOGICAL FOOD RESEARCH

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I.

The Danish ethnologist Bjarne Stoklund contrasted the preference of the ethnological research for specializing in different research fields to the effort of the anthropological research towards a holistic way of looking at culture (*Ethnologia Scandinavica* 1972). Ethnology has been called „The Study of the Concrete“. Allowing different research fields to form categories may, however, lead to a risky division of our entire research field. Several ethnological as well as folkloristic journals have come into existence and different fraternities have arisen with the purpose of studying one or other of the special research fields, just as journals and organizations for collectors of anything from barbed wire to veteran cars do come into being. With this background it is understandable as well as debatable that a group of ethnologists in Europe and in the United States since more than a decade meet for conferences on food research.

All the branches of industry which ethnologists of age have studied have in view the procuring of food for man and animal. The study of food habits and meal customs must therefore be regarded as a legitimate as well as a central research field. Conferences on food culture may contribute to new initiatives in research and may furthermore give the individual scholar enhanced motivation in his work.

Conferences on food habits may increase our actual knowledge without providing us with a better understanding of the forces which build up, maintain, and alter our food habits. Specialized conferences of this kind can on the other hand contribute to strengthen the disreputable theory hostility of ethnology.

Experience shows that it is difficult to induce participants in the food conferences to live up to the intended level of ambition. It is sometimes also difficult to make them stick to the prescribed theme. This may partly be due to the fact that ethnological food research is carried out in several different connections: as a hobby, at museums, at university institutes etc. We must also keep in mind that the theoretical level varies largely in different parts of Europe and the United States, because of different degrees of contact with twin-institutes and neighbouring sciences, but also because of overlapping indirectly or directly with ruling ideologies. Ethnologists do not work in a social vacuum, no more than other scholars.

The fact that the contributions to the ethnological food conferences have been of varying quality, is no reason why the conferences should cease. Besides creating opportunities for personal contacts between scientists from different countries, the ethnological food conferences may play a greater role in society than what we have realized so far. The connection between eating habits and health and disease has become more obvious to medical research. To investigate food habits may not only contribute to the mapping of certain items, which is of interest in itself, but may also be of significance for the work towards improved health of people both in the industrial countries and in the developing

countries. Therefore, it can be considered a sign of the times that Swedish ethnologists, simultaneously with demographers, social-anthropologists, economic historians, and nutritional physiologists recently have been engaged in a cross-scientific research programme regarding food in the light of history.

There are, however, also other motives for ethnological studies of food habits. Nowhere does man expose himself and his culture as distinctly as he does at the dining-table. Material, spiritual, and social factors co-operate in the repast. The meal brings out man's prosperity or poverty, his nearness to or distance from his fellow-men, and his attitude towards the sensual and the metaphysical. The meal is a cultural charter revealing our innermost being. The task of the ethnologist is therefore to make this manifest through analyses of food habits and meal customs. Consequently, the study of food may contribute to our knowledge of the entire human being.

II.

On the VII International Congress of the Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences in Moscow in 1964, first contacts were established between the participating European food researchers at the instigation of E. Kishán and G. Wiegelmann. Ways and means of intensifying European cooperation were discussed, among them a working conference. Arnold Niederer agreed to organize such a European conference on food research, but unfortunately he was unable to raise the necessary funds in Switzerland.

At the anthropological world congress in Tokyo in 1968 an „International Committee for the Anthropology of Food and Food Habits“ was formed with the aim of providing a link between scholars belonging to the various disciplines interested in the study of food and nutrition as a cultural phenomenon. Margaret L. Arnott, Philadelphia, was appointed chairman, Igor de Garine, Paris, secretary, and Robert L. Freedman, Honolulu, editor and co-ordinator of a planned journal. In the discussions in Tokyo Grith Lerche at the International Secretariat for the Study of Agricultural Implements, Copenhagen, took part. In an ethnological field-seminar in the Carpathians before that conference, in which both of us participated, the idea of arranging an ethnological food conference in Lund was brought up. With the aid of the Editorial Board of *ETHNOLOGIA EUROPAEA* a contact net was established with the intention of gathering ethnologists interested in food research in Europe and the United States. I myself had become professor of ethnology at the University of Lund in 1967 and my first feat of strength in this position was to arrange an international conference in that city. The planning was carried out in close co-operation with Günter Wiegelmann, who through his book „Alltags- und Festspeisen“ (Marburg 1967) had brought the ethnological food research to a high level. This and other studies were primarily carried out from the diffusionistic points of view; the Editorial Board of *ETHNOLOGIA EUROPAEA* coincided to a great extent with the International Atlas Commission. At the conference in Lund we also discussed concrete suggestions for a mapping of different food elements.

The most important task at the conference in Lund, August 21-25, 1970, was, however, to make a survey of the state of ethnological food research. This proved an extensive task but by dividing the work between the participants in the conference, it was possible to get international reports which all together gave a rather good assessment of the

condition in Europe and the United States. The reports were published in *ETHNOLOGIA EUROPAEA* Volume 5, 1971, and were also published as a separate volume (Bringéus/Wiegelmann 1972).

This volume shows that the interest in food habits was markedly great in Eastern Europe but also in the western parts of Europe. White areas in this survey are only formed by the Iberian Peninsula and Italy. The studies of different food elements are in the foreground, probably because the ethnological food research in the greater part of Europe has been carried out mainly at the museums, where household utensils often form the largest group of objects, or at institutes responsible for ethnological atlas work. The regional differences turn out to be far better investigated than the social variations. In this way food research closely reflects the ethnological research situation as a whole. As a theme for discussion at the conference in Lund we selected problems and methods in ethnological food research. Most scholars preferred to apply methods in concrete case studies, according to the ethnological research tradition. The contributions were published in *Ethnologia Scandinavica* (1971) and presented under the following headings: „Sources and their Treatment“, „Hunger and Plenty“, „Kitchen Utensils and Food Habits“, „Food Complex Studies“, „Distribution and Change“, and „Individual Food Elements“.

Among the contributions of essential significance at this conference in Lund, Günter Wiegelmann's lecture: „Was ist der spezielle Aspekt ethnologischer Nahrungsforschung?“ ranks first. Wiegelmann attempts to synthesize the entire research field and he regards the study of consumption, i.e. the meal, to be specific for ethnological food studies. In fact, Wiegelmann widens the ethnological food research in this way from a mere element study to a system study. Attempts in this direction were also made by the ethnologist Renée Valeri in Lund in her „Study of Traditional Food Supply in the South-West of France“. She describes the structures of meals of different categories in one and the same home.

Another lecture in Lund of essential significance was Harald Hvarfner's „Hunger at Fixed Times. An ethnic accumulation with biological consequences.“ In this connection the lecture by the Polish ethnologist Anna Kowalska-Lewicka deserves attention. It was entitled: „Der Hunger und die Magie des Überflusses an Nahrung in der traditionellen Kultur der polnischen Karpaten.“

Since the first conference in Lund, this working group considers itself a loose and informal group which above all concentrates on ethnological and historical food research in Europe. Supplementary contributions from other regions are welcome, however, as long as they fit into the general subject of the conference. The author of this report acts as the chairman of this group.

In *Ethnologia Scandinavica* (1971) the Finnish ethnologist Hilikka Uusivirta presents the newly opened hotel and restaurant museum in Helsinki. In August 1973 this museum received the participants of the second international symposium on ethnological food research. The chairman of the committee which organized the conference was Professor Niilo Valonen in Helsinki, while Hilikka Uusivirta was the secretary. The conference was as large as the previous conference, i.e. 40 participants, and the lectures were also published in a special volume (Valonen/Lehtonen 1975; compare also the presentation of the conference published in *Ethnologia Scandinavica*, 1974, by Kurt Genrup).

In connection with the discussions in Lund, the theme for the conference in Helsinki became: „Dominierende Züge in regionalen Speisesystemen im 20. Jahrhundert“. In other words, it was the national dishes which our interest was focused on. Scholars from the host country contributed, not unexpectedly, with lectures on drinking habits and Russian

past. Mostly the festival courses have been promoted to the rank and dignity of national dishes and this enabled American scholars to lecture on the turkey and other dishes served at the American „Thanksgiving-dinner“.

At this conference Konrad Köstlin and Ulrich Tolksdorf, both from Kiel, presented the most important lectures. Tolksdorf's paper was entitled: „Ernährung und soziale Situation“. In connection with the assertion that the social situation has until recently been neglected in ethnological food research, he maintained that the relationships between the social system on the one hand, and the cultural system of nutrition on the other, i.e. the „Speisen“ or „Mahlzeiten“ systems, must be clarified. The author discussed previous suggestions for systematization and makes them operational for concrete analyses. This structuralistic contribution was later published in an enlarged version and with comments by leading European ethnologists in *ETHNOLOGIA EUROPAEA* (vol. IX, 1).

Konrad Köstlin's contribution: „Revitalisierung regionaler Kost“ dealt with an aspect of the present-day food habits which has proven more and more important. In this connection regional food tends to be placed in contrast to the products of industrial society. A good example of revitalization of a regional diet habit is the beer from the isle of Gotland, which was the object of a doctoral thesis by Anders Salomonsson, an ethnologist from Lund (compare *ETHNOLOGIA EUROPAEA* 1972 and Salomonsson 1977/78). Revitalization of old food habits has come to be of great importance, especially for the demonstration of regional identity. Last August, the Nordic Institute of Folklore in Turku arranged a Nordic conference in Finland which aimed at elucidating this problem.

The third conference took place in Cardiff, Wales, in 1977. Here Trefor M. Owen, S:t Faggans, and Alexander Fenton, Edinburgh, were the inviters. The conference was hosted by the Welsh Folk Museum and was no doubt the best organized conference so far. The theme was „Food Taboos“, but as usual the lectures covered a larger field and have been published by Fenton and Owen under the more general title: „Food in Perspectives“ (1981). All the 33 contributions were published in English which means that the conference transactions for the first time were given a uniform linguistic garb.

However, the content of this volume is very diversified. In fact, Köstlin and Tolksdorf are the only ones to keep strictly to the theme of the conference. In any case several contributions are of great interest. John Widdowson's lecture: „Food and Traditional Verbal Modes in the Social Control of Children“ linked up with „The Trive-Bit: A Study of Cultural Adaptation“ by the writer.

No less than ten scholars from the United States took part in this conference, among them also some nutritional physiologists. Some of the American participants dealt with ethnic food such as „The Sausage Culture of the Pennsylvania Germans“ (Don Yoder), „The First Ethnic Cook-Book in the United States“ (William Woys Weaver), „Greek Immigrant Cuisine in America: Continuity and Change“ (Robert J. Theodoratus). The time scope of the lectures at the Cardiff conference was also considerable. We listened to lectures on: „Some Symbolic Aspects of Food Products in the Light of the Thirteenth Century Polish Historical Source“ (Maria Dembińska), „The Production of Medicinal Wines in Hungary in the Fifteenth Century“ (Erzsébet Sergö) and „The Use of Cannabis in two Cookery Books of the Fifteenth Century“ (Johanna Maria van Winter), on „Food and Meals in Country Donegal in 1891“ (Laura Jones), but also on „Frozen TV-Dinners – The Staple Emergency Meals of a Changing Modern Society“ (Norge W. Jerome).

Paul Raybaut, France, tried to take the initiative for „An Anthropology Handbook on Food Habits for the Knowledge of Man's Food Behaviour“, but was met with little response. The participants in the conference decided, however, to constitute an international working group with the aim of assisting the local organizer of future conferences.

The fourth conference was held in Austria in August 1980 and was arranged by Dr. Maria Kundegraber, curator of the Farmer's Museum at Schloß Stainz, Styria, Austria, together with her predecessor Dr. Anni Gamerith. „Food as Communication“ was chosen to be the theme of this conference.

The beautifully located site of the conference together with a well organized museum with emphasis on regional food traditions attracted an unprecedentedly large number of participants. The conference halls as well as the accommodation for the majority of the participants were located in a newly built boarding-school. Anni Gamerith also did her best to give the participants a taste of the Steiermark cuisine and during the excursion which concluded the conference, many of us entered a smoke-house still in use (without a chimney) for the first time.

The organization committee gave directions of possibilities for concrete exemplification (Food Preparation as Common Work, Food as a Gift, Ways of Communication, Opportunities for Communication, What is Communicated with the Aid of Food, Uniting and Separating Effects of the Meal). Still, only few lecturers dealt with the communicative function of food and meals. Among the lectures which in a thrilling way brought up the theme of the conference was above all Judit Katona Apte's structural presentation of the meal as a language. The primary hypothesis of her paper was that food is similar to language with respect to structure, usage, and evoked responses in human beings. The metaphor is significant from the evolutionary, ontogenetic, structural, socio-cultural and psychological perspectives.

Another aspect of food as communication was presented by Dr. Anna Kowalska-Lewicka (Kraków) in her lecture „Food as a Gift — its Economical, Social and Ritual Magic Function“. Other contributions of great interest were Pierre Gentlivre's (Neuchatel) entitled: „Social Groups and Extra-Domestic Food and Eating — Among Others: Picnics, Business, Military, University Canteens, Outings etc“ and Konrad Köstlin's lecture on „The Stew as a Symbol in Germany“.

The conference at Stainz has recently been dealt with extensively in an evaluation by Margot Schindler in the „Österreichische Zeitschrift für Volkskunde“ (83, 1980, p. 252-63).

The lectures will hopefully be published by M. Kundegraber who was practically alone responsible for the fourth ethnological food conference. A presentation of the Stainz conference made by one of the participants, Lorna J. Sass, in the New York Times gave unexpected response. More than a hundred individual scholars and institutes requested information on the conference and the preceding conferences. The interest in ethnological and anthropological food research in the United States has proved to be very great and since a few years a couple of organizations publish special Newsletters with information of planned activities in this field in different parts of the world. At the world congress in Chicago the international committee for anthropological and ethnological food research had a session (published by Mouton). No such invitation was made at the conference in New Delhi. There are, however, possibilities for arranging a special session for food research at the international anthropological congress planned to take place in Quebec and Vancouver in 1983.

The 5th International Conference is planned to be held in Hungary; it will be organized by Dr. Eszter Kisbán of the Ethnographic Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. The subject proposed for this conference is 'Phases and Pivotal Points in the History of European Traditional Food'.

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