Group 1 - Explaining Religious Food Taboos

Taboos, forbidden deeds, are prohibitions present in every culture. These prohibitions often regulate our dietary habits. Foods that one culture perceive as consumable might be considered unclean by another. Each religion poses its own views on certain foods that are deemed taboo. For Hindus, the consumption of a sacred cow is looked down upon, for Muslims the same rules apply when met with the eating of pork by others. Similarly other religions portray different eating habits by excluding certain items from their diet. Each religion defines the exclusion of a food item for a variety of reasons pertaining to their beliefs and thus one is presented with food taboos in relation to ones’ religion daily (Blackham 1966:10).

Food taboos are known all over the world, in different religions or different tribes. Tribes such as ones in the Amazon, Papua New Guinea, Nigeria, Malaysia, Cameroon, and Mexico are sometimes overlooked in terms of what their food taboos could be and what is beneficial and dangerous to each of their tribes. Each of these places has different food taboos that one might not think of or understand when thinking about their own culture.

In the Amazon, many tribes categorize their foods into two categories, manzo, which is considered safe and reimoso, which is considered taboo (Piperata 2008:1098). Indigenous people in the Amazon consider food such as certain fish, monkeys, tapir, caiman, some turtles, wild pigs, and numerous fruits to be most taboo when a woman is pregnant until the infant’s navel are healed from after birth. In the Amazon, older generations know more about why a certain food is taboo than younger generations. Most common answers were because of their acidity and fattiness (Piperata, 2008:1098).

Papua New Guinea had many diverse food taboos that one might think is strange when thinking about their own food taboos. Women were not allowed to eat fresh meat, bananas, and any fruit with red color because of their menstruation cycles. If women do eat some of these food taboos, it is believed that they will not be able to bear a child (Meyer-Rochow 2009:3). Another surprising fact is that if a man is going fishing for a shark, he is not allowed to engage in sexual intercourse for a period of time. (Meyer-Rochow 2009:4). These taboos are not explained as to why people believe them other than tradition.

Meat is a major food taboo for some people in some tribes of Nigeria. Parents believe that if their children eat meat and eggs, it will convince the children to steal. Coconut milk and liver are not good for children to drink and eat as well because it is understood the milk makes children insane and the liver causes inflammations in the lungs (Meyer-Rochow 2009:4). Pregnant woman must follow this too or it is believed the child will develop bad habits once born (Meyer-Rochow 2009:4). Other than causing illnesses, it is not known why these taboos are followed.

In Malaysia, there are many tribes that call themselves the “Orang Asli” and have a vast amount of food taboos that are very different. Pregnant woman have a restricted diet of rats, squirrels, frogs, toads, smaller birds and fishes because they are thought to possess “weak” spirits, and they do not want pregnant woman to be overcome by strong spirits (Meyer-Rochow 2009:3). Men who are married and have a wife expecting a child are also bound to these taboos. It is not known why these taboos are intact other than tradition.

In Cameroon, it is very taboo for a Muslim to drink beer because it was believed the Muslim would be prevented from observing his devotions and praying five times a day (Fomine 2009:45). Warthogs are also a taboo in Cameroon because Muslims consider it to be dirty and if a pregnant woman violates this, it is believed her child will resemble the warthog (Fomine 2009:45). It remains controversial as to why the Muslim believe these taboos.

In Brazil, the simultaneous consumption of milk, mangoes, oranges, pineapples and nuts were considered the most frequent taboos for pregnant woman because the combinations could be harmful (Torres and Garibay 2003:142). All foods considered cold, such as fruits and vegetables were tabooed because during delivery, there is a loss of heat. Many of their taboos come from a complex belief system derived from the medical humeral theory (Torres and Garibay 2003: 147).

Figure 1: A tribe of cannibals in Papua New Guinea, has recently sworn off its ancient practices because of globalization’s stigma of this behavior. (http://www.dailymail.co.uk 2007: Fig.1)
Taboos created to fit a culture’s norms are exhibited in most religions. While some religions declare certain food items fit, others consider them unfit for consumption (Meyer-Rochow 2009: 2). Buddhism is no exception. Since its origin in Nepal, Buddhism has spread its wings and has become the dominant religion in numerous countries. However, its expansion has given birth to two separate branches: Mahayana Buddhism and Theravada Buddhism. Each witnesses separate taboos despite their adherence to the same scripture.

Though not restricting a major portion of a diet, the texts exclude consumption of meat, alcohol, garlic, onions and other strong flavors for it was considered unclean. However, it is important to note that the prohibitions of such foods are practiced in Mahayana Buddhism and are rare in Theravada. The two major sources to assess the propriety of eating meat were the monastic regulations and a number of Mahayana scriptures. Emerging at different times, and written in dissimilar styles, these scriptures provided definitive answers to questions about all manner of problems in the day-to-day life of monks and nuns, including the question of what they were to eat (Kieschnick 2005: 187). According to these lengthy texts, Buddha did allow his disciples to eat meat provided that they did not kill the animals themselves and that the animals were not killed expressively for them (Kieschnick 2005: 187). If such was the case, the meat was considered impure and taboo to eat. In order to avoid the consumption of “sinful” meats, a policy was formulated under the heading of three types of impure meats. If one had seen, heard or suspects that an animal was slayed for the purpose of consumption, the meat of this animal is considered impure and should not be eaten (Harvey 2000: 158).

Both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism, however, converge when the prohibition against eating particular types of animals, despite meeting the guidelines, are at hand. As proclaimed by Buddha, it is forbidden to eat elephant, horse, serpent, dog, or human meat. The reasons for proscribing this peculiar list of flesh are telling regarding the society in which they are followed. It is forbidden to eat elephant or horse meat as they are animals used by rulers. “They are not to eat snake meat because to do so would offend the powerful naga (serpent) gods” (Kieschnick 2005: 188). Finally, they are not to eat dog meat because it would reduce their position in the eyes of “people standing”. Nonetheless, vegetarianism is promoted for the Buddhist belief of reincarnation. In this never ending cycle of life and death, the Buddha explains, the animals we eat may in a past life have been our relatives.

The consumption of alcohol and any intoxicating substance is also strictly prohibited by scriptures (Benn 2005: 221). This is portrayed in the precepts (code of ethics one is to live by) of Buddhism itself. These precepts may very well be called guidelines for Buddhists to follow in order to reach an enlightened state (nirvana). The fifth precept states: “I will not use, deal with or supply harmful and intoxicating drugs and alcoholic drinks” (relijournal.com). Thus one can view alcohol as one of the many taboos in Buddhism for intoxication effects ones judgment and perception and goes against the mediate lifestyle Buddhism promotes.

The Buddhist belief of reincarnation portrays the reasoning behind promoting a vegetarian diet for the consumption of a past relative seems less than ideal. Similarly the mediate lifestyle promoted shows alcohol as a stray way and as an obstruction to reaching nirvana. As one can see taboos are not invented for baseless reasons but rather for fear of social and physical repercussions.

Figure 2: A women offering food to Buddhist monks during the Songkran Festival which marks the end of the old year and the beginning of a new one in Thailand. (http://beautifulcountry-laos.blogspot.com 2008: Fig. 2)

Food taboos originate and proliferate for multiple reasons. In the case of the Hindu food taboo on eating beef, both the religious beliefs of karma and reincarnation set the foundation, while the environmental advantages of the cow and the cultural identity marker strengthened the avoidance of eating cattle into a full cultural taboo. Reverence for life and reincarnation are fundamental beliefs lying at the base of this food taboo (Meyer 2009). Hindus believe the cow is a humble and giving creature. The cow gives by producing milk, plowing fields and recycling the unused remains of crops; while taking little in return. The cow is a vital part of agricultural Indian life because of its many advantages. The cow not only is used to pull the plows through fields but its dung is used as both fertilizer and an energy source in the Indian home for cooking (Harris 1966).
Originally ancient Hindus treated the slaughtering of cows as part of normal sacrificial rites but after a spiritual transformation by the year 1000 A.D. Hindus were forbidden to eat or harm cattle (Harris 1978). The invasion of Muslims in India around the same time helped solidify the food taboo, as it became a part of the Hindu cultural identity in the face of the encroaching Muslims (Harris 1978). This marker of identity was picked up by revivalist movements in colonial British India and used as a symbol to purify Hindu beliefs. In British India the need for territorializing spaces for the dominance of culture grew between Muslims and Hindus long before the official partition was ever in place; by creating 'zones of tradition' Hindus could create communities of cultural dominance (Jones 2007). Hindu activists sought to strengthen their culture by creating bans on the slaughter of the cow and enforcing them through the Zamindars, who owned most of the land in India. These bans created a feeling of restriction among the Muslim tenants of the Zamindars’ land; which caused mass migrations of the Islamic tenants to move to Muslim zones of tradition, strengthening and empowering the Hindu zones (Jones 2007).

In our opinion, today the taboo on beef is less a religious practice and more about preserving Hindu culture in a world where cultures are constantly being changed and blended. Recently, an Indian scholar, D.N. Jha, authored a book titled 'The Myth of the Holy Cow' which discusses the ancient Hindus' consumption of beef. The book created such uproar and backlash in India that not only was his book denied by his publisher but he received threats to his life and had to be escorted by police for some time (Eakin 2002). Jha’s work has been published in the US and UK but Indian stores refuse to shelve it. In Benares, a Hindu priest commented on Jha’s book saying the author was a part of “anti national forces trying to destroy Indian culture and tradition. (Deb 2001:20)” The Hindu beef taboo began as a reverence to life and an environmental advantage; and flourished into a powerful symbol of culture giving Hindu’s everywhere a sense of imagined community.

Islam is the second most practiced religion in the world and with this expansive following emanates misperceptions regarding its practices (Kottack 2010:202). Islam’s food taboos are largely influenced by other religious practices, historical traditions, as well as sanitation issues. These procedures have become so widespread that major corporations have been adapting their menus in order to better suit the needs of the international community (See Global Reactions To McDonald’s).

The main debate in Islam is between Halal versus Haraam rituals. Haraam is defined as acts and substances forbidden by the Holy Scriptures. While Halal is defined as dietary habits considered tolerable according to the Qur’an. According to Islamic law, Sharia, orthodox Muslims should not consume pork, blood, the carcasses of dead animals, animals slaughtered in any other name than Allah’s, alcohol, or any other food product that involves the mistreatment of animals (Lerner 2006:5). The Qur’an states: “He hath forbidden you only carrion, and blood, and swine flesh, and that which hath been immolated to (the name of) any other than Allah. But he who is driven by necessity, neither craving nor transgressing, it is no sin for him. Lo! Allah is Forgiving, Merciful,” (Qur’an 2: 173). Great emphasis is placed on the fair treatment of animals as they too are creations of Allah.

Pork is the most notable of Islamic food taboos as its exclusion has been one of great debate. Many polytheistic religions, in close proximity to Islamic centers of development have often used pigs as a sacrifice to their gods; creating a negative connotation towards pigs. Another assumption regarding pork is of its traditional impure connotations (Lobban 1994). This thought has been traced back to the times of ancient civilizations. Theories on this perception range from the rapidity of decay of the meat due to high Middle Eastern temperatures; to the fear of disease due to the fifth most pigs are kept in (Simoons 1961:37). This idea of pork as tainted is not shared amongst all Muslims. The history of the region is that of nomadic, pastoral peoples. This would include the raising of pigs to sustain the populace. Pork was used, not only to sustain communities, but for the medicinal qualities which it was attributed. This left many cultures wary of its elimination from everyday life. Islam’s prohibition of pork is largely accredited to other religions’ influence in the region.
Within Judaism, Kosher foods are those in conformity with Judaic dietary laws. Kosher law is derived from the Torah, the sacred scripture of Judaism (Danzger 1990:463). The Torah prohibits the consumption of animals that have died of natural causes. Moreover, for any meat to be considered kosher or lawful, it must be slaughtered in accordance with the Shechita ritual. The book of Leviticus provides guidance to kosher laws, “whatever parts of the hoof and is cloven-footed and chews the cud, among animals, you may eat. Nevertheless, among thickset that chew the cud or part the hoof, you shall not eat these: camel…is unclean to you. And the rock badger… is unclean to you. And the hare… is unclean to you. And the pig…is unclean to you. You shall not eat any of their flesh and you shall not touch their carcasses; they are unclean to you.” (Leviticus 11:3-8). Fish must have fins and scales to be considered Kosher (Leviticus 11:9-12). Also, in the book of Leviticus, further restrictions are placed upon the food to be considered lawful, “And every soul that eateth that which died of itself, or that which was torn with beasts, whether it be one of your own country, or a stranger, he shall both wash his clothes, and bathe himself in water, and be unclean until the even: then shall he be clean.” (Leviticus 17:15). Judaism, the oldest of the Abrahamic religions, has had an enormous influence on both Islam and Christianity.

Similar to Judaism, Muslims observe the holy month of Ramadan, which involves fasting during daylight hours. Parallel to Judaism is the concept that no animal is considered lawful unless it has been slaughtered according to the proper ritual at the instant of slaughter. On the other hand, dissimilarly to Judaism and Christianity, Islam forbids its followers the consumption of intoxicated beverages. Islam has based many of its rituals on those of Judaism, as Judaism was once the major religion of the Middle East. In the Quran adherents of Judaism and Christianity are identified as People of the Book, a term of respect for these other religions (Kershaw 2002:2). The Qur’an discusses how all that is lawful to these respected religions is respectable for those practicing Islam (Qur’an 5: 5). However, there is a belief that Mohammed identified pork as an unsuitable substance in order to differentiate the religion from its chief opponent, Christianity. Modern followers of Christianity fail to obey traditional taboos on pork, contrary to their sister Abrahamic religions. The use and consumption of camel meat is also seen as a topic of confusion. Native Iranian nomadic populations that sacrificed camels in the name of Allah used the argument that Jesus, a figure considered prophetic under Islamic principles, declared the usage and consumption of camel meat as acceptable (Simoons 1961:89). However sacrifice has become increasingly seen as a heathen ceremony, causing many to exclude camel from their diets completely.
Unlike both Judaism and Islam, Christianity does not adhere to any specific food taboos. In the New Testament, Jesus is said to have "declared all food clean" (Mark 7:19). Regardless, several major branches of Christianity prohibit some foods (Ensminger 1994). For instance, followers of the Greek Orthodox sect of Christianity restrict the use of meat, fish, poultry, eggs and dairy products on Wednesdays and Fridays. Mormons prohibit the ingestion of alcoholic beverages, tea and coffee and Seven-day Adventists are taught to avoid tea, ripened cheese, excess sugar, irritating spices and too much salt (Ensminger 1994).

More than half of the world population adheres to the three Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. These three monotheistic religions possess similarities and differences in their beliefs and practices. Amongst these practices are food taboos regulated by their respective dietary laws. An interesting fact, from an anthropological perspective is that, these food taboos restrict more than half of the human population to the consumption of selected foods. “Violation or poor adherence to the taboo can be considered as grave religious insult or cultural transgressions.” (Lobban 1994). These taboos are significant markers of their ethnicity.

The understanding of religious food taboos necessitates the understanding of the historical and social circumstances that led to the prohibition of these foods. Food restrictions are used to unify faiths under cohesive structures of the devout, and they also provide differentiations between sectors of belief systems. With globalization has come the alteration of common local beliefs in order to suit the expectations of global society (Hefner 1998:84). Cultures have continued to leave impressions on one another. The diffusion of religious consumption patterns has allowed the better understanding of the interactions between faiths.

Excellent work-- the least edits I've suggested for any entry. You did a great job of noting whether there were alternative reasons for the taboo other than religious reasons.