Commensalism as Practical Symbol and Symbolic Practice Among the Sgaw Karen of Northern Thailand

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Introduction

In the first full length anthropological monograph on the Karen published in 1922, the Reverend Harry Ignatius Marshall devoted an entire chapter, entitled "Food and its Preparation", to describing the various kinds of food eaten by the Karen and how they were prepared in remarkable detail and with admirable objectivity. Marshall also observed that:

The serving of food among the Karen is a simple matter. The rice is emptied into a tray, the meats or vegetables are put in little bowls, and all are set on a mat on the floor. The members of the household squat around this "family board" and eat with the hand. They pour gravy from the meat, fish, or other side-dishes on the rice, work it with the fingers, and convey the food in compact lumps to their mouths.... There is not much sociability about a Karen meal. Each person attends to his eating until he has finished, when he rises, rinses off his hands, quenches his thirst with a drink of water, and withdraws to sit down, or leaves the house without formality. The members of a family generally eat together; but if guests are present, the women usually wait until the men are served. Large quantities of food are prepared for wedding and funeral-feasts, which, as a rule, the men and women partake of separately without particular order or arrangement. (1922:70)

The Karen, who speak a Sino-Tibetan language are to be found in Burma and Thailand where they are estimated to number approximately 2.2 million and 242,000 respectively. The Karen, of whom the largest sub-groups based on dialectal differences are the Sgaw and Pwo, are not new to the anthropological literature and it is not uncommon to find in the literature brief accounts of
their diet, dietary habits, and modes of feasting of one kind or another. Nevertheless these accounts do not rival Marshall's descriptions in their attention to detail; and, rather unfortunately, there has been no attempt to follow upon his pioneering work with a systematic study of Karen cuisine, food symbolism, and eating customs.

In this paper I attempt to fill in this gap in the modern ethnography of the Karen in northern Thailand, following a particular line of enquiry suggested by Marshall's remarks on the lack of "sociability" in a Karen meal and the apparent absence of "order" or "arrangement" in feasting. Specifically, I seek to examine one aspect of the significance of the eating of food, namely eating as a day-to-day activity and as a key feature in various rituals among the Sgaw Karen of Palokhi, a village situated approximately ninety kilometres northwest of the provincial capital of Chiang Mai. This paper attempts to set out a framework for analysing the significance of eating in these two contexts and test its utility by applying it to a specific ritual involving commensalism which has hitherto not been reported in the literature on the Karen. This ritual is called the "Eating of the Head Rice" ('Au' By Kho).

In analytical terms, the rite is a strategic one. It is quite unambiguously a first fruits ceremony, integral to the corpus of agricultural rites in Palokhi, and is concerned with the appropriation of rice from a larger world. The importance of the rite is also indicated by its name. In the symbolic system of the Palokhi Karen, the term kho or "head" not only implies superordination but also connotes, in more general applications of the term, the idea of temporal priority, in the sense of "that which comes first". For example, the first libations of rice liquor in the ritual propitiations of the tutelary spirit of the domain — the "Lord of the Water, Lord of the Land" or Thi Koe'ca, Kau Koe'ca — in which the village is situated are called khwae'si'a' kho as opposed to the last libations which are called khwae'si'a' da'. To give yet another example, prime liquor, which is the first distillate, is called si' kho thi (literally, "liquor of the head water" or, as we might say it, of the "first water"). All of these terms with kho imply precedence or priority of one kind or another. In other applications of the term, kho may also stand for the whole as is indeed the case with the "head rice". The "Eating of the Head Rice" is also worthy of closer examination because of the multiplicity of its other symbolic significations. Unlike all other agricultural rites in Palokhi, it is performed by women rather than men and is focussed especially within the domestic domain.

The consumption of food for sustenance forms the most fundamental goal of productive activity in Palokhi. Besides this, or indeed perhaps because of this, eating as an activity and idiom in verbal expressions appears to be a pervasive means of expressing and communicating ideas, concepts and cultural meanings about social relations.

I have described elsewhere (1986), for example, what is called the "Head Rite" (Ta Ly Kho) and its sequel in Palokhi, and showed how the ritual