CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

When human beings convert some part of their environmental resources into food, they create a powerful semiotic device. In its tangible and material forms, food presupposes and reifies technological arrangements, relations of production and exchange, conditions of field and market, and realities of plenty and wants. It is therefore a highly condensed social fact. It is also, in many human societies, a plastic kind of collective representation. Even the simplest human cuisines, as Levi-Strauss (1966) has suggested, encode subtle cosmological propositions. With the elaboration of cuisine and its socio-economic context, the capacity of food to bear social messages is increased.

As many anthropologists have shown, food, in its varied guises, contexts, and functions, can signal rank and rivalry, solidarity and community, identity or exclusion, and intimacy or distance (Geertz 1960, Firth 1973, Strathern 1973, Ortner 1978). This feature of food has two general sources. One, unlike houses, pots or clothing, food is a constant need but a perishable good. The daily pressure to cook food combined with the pressure to produce or acquire it makes it well suited to bear the load of everyday social discourse. The second fundamental fact about food is its capacity to mobilize strong emotions. This characteristic, no doubt, has roots in the powerful association, in the human life cycle, between the positive memory of nurture and the equally powerful
negative experiences (such as weaning) of early human life (Angyal 1941). It is these facts that account for the affective role played in systems of food classification by foods that are abhorred, avoided, or feared.

Exploration of these issues by anthropologists has generally taken one of the following approaches: one, following the lead of Richards (1932, 1939) and Malinowski (1965), anthropologists have sought to locate the role of food in social organization and, two, following the lead of Levi-Strauss (1966), they have sought to understand food as a cultural system, a system of symbols, categories, and meanings. An important set of related works in the 1960s sought to bridge these approaches, particularly in relation to problems of food avoidance and animal classification (Douglas 1966, Bulmer 1967, Tambiah 1969). My own modest analysis somewhat fits into the second approach. The present foray into Garo food has led to the following major conclusions.

**Men the Hunter, Women the Forager**

"Men the hunter and women the forager": this is a much debated concept. Nonetheless, in the studied areas, hunters were solely men while women foraged (men rarely helped them). Interestingly, ethnographies from around the world have shown that women do hunt and hunting is not solely undertaken by men. For instance, Brightman (1996) indicates that many Woods Cree women trapped fur-bearing animals alone or in groups and that some women, both married and unmarried, hunted moose, caribou and bear. Romanoff (1983) describes Matses women in the Peruvian Amazon who accompany
their husbands, helping to chase and kill animals, while Hurtado et al. (1985) indicate that Ache women in Paraguay help men search for and transport captured animals, occasionally killing animals themselves. A systematic study of Agta women hunters was made by Estioko-Griffin (1990). Most Agta women hunt, and a limited number of Agta women were proficient hunters with bows and arrows, machetes, knives, traps and dogs. Her study is important for it demonstrates that women hunters can be just as efficient and successful as male hunters. However, Agta women hunted substantially less than men and tended to hunt in groups and with dogs for smaller animals.

Notwithstanding such examples, Garo women are not known to take part in hunting, even of small animals like squirrels, hares and rats. Even among aquatic fauna, they are known to catch only “small” fish and collect crabs, cockles and shrimps and are not known to catch “big” fish with the net, nor catch frogs, tortoises and eels. Murdock and Provost (1973: 210), while discussing at length the reasons behind sexual division of labour, mention “masculine advantage” as an important factor. Some activities are assigned according to gender because some activities give men a definite advantage and women a definite disadvantage. Thus men who are generally endowed with greater physical strength than women use it in brief bursts of excessive energy like hunting of both big and small game, catching of “big” fish at night with the spear etc. whereas women tend to be more closely attached to the home by burdens of pregnancy and infant care and therefore suffer a disadvantage in undertaking tasks which must be performed at a distance from the household. However, Estioko-Griffin (1990) has found
that the Agta women hunters with young children did not experience higher child mortality than women with children who did not hunt.

Judith Brown (1970: 1074) opines that the degree to which women participate in subsistence activities depends upon the compatibility of the latter with simultaneous child-care responsibilities. Women are most likely to make a substantial contribution where subsistence activities have the following characteristics: the participant is not obliged to be far from home, the tasks are relatively monotonous and do not require rapt concentration, and the work is not dangerous, can be performed in spite of interruptions and is easily resumed once interrupted. This she calls the “feminine advantage”.

In the two studied villages, men are seen performing “masculine” activities like hunting and catching “big” fish. Very rarely are men seen foraging for vegetable food, except if they have to collect honey combs. On the other hand, women collect those vegetable items from the wilds which are considered indigenous. These include bamboo shoot, mushrooms, and numerous roots, shoots, tubers, leaves and fruits.

Just as in the hunting-gathering sphere, Garo foodways are highly structured along gender and age lines. For instance, as seen in the previous chapters, men and women have assigned tasks in the food acquisition methods. There are stages in cultivation (both dry and wet paddy) which are gender-specific. Again, it is observed that when the invention of a new artifact or process supplants an older and simpler one such activity tends to be assigned to men. The introduction of the plough, for example, seems to have increased masculine participation in all agricultural operations and not alone in soil preparation.
Unlike the functional reasons given by Murdock and Provost (1973), discussing labour in the context of the two villages appears to be a case of dominance-subjugation. Through sole monopoly over hunting, men seem to reiterate their dominance over women who have control over a less-prestigious task, i.e., food foraging. This seems to be reiterated at home too, where men are the nokgipa (head of household) and make decisions for the house and children, which the wives adhere to even though they hold the dubious distinction of being the actual “owners” of land and property and through whom the lineage passes on. This position seems highly ironical in a matrilineal society.

Rice is Self, Meat is Prestige

For the Garos, as for the Japanese (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993), “Rice is Self” — it is the most important ritually pure food required for all major rituals and used symbolically on a number of occasions. No food gives the spiritual and physical satisfaction that rice gives. It is rice that is considered staple and core, which gives a feeling of “fullness” after consumption, which no other food (for main meals) gives. It is that food around which all else revolves. Other cereals like wheat and millet are named in reference to it (rice = mi, wheat = mi gom, millet = mi si). Mid-day meal or lunch is called mi sal (day-time rice) and evening meal or dinner is called mi attam (evening-time rice). The economic status of a family is also gauged in the context of how much rice a family harvests annually.

Rice is that food for which special rituals are conducted — Wangala/Wanna by Songsarek/Sangsarek Garos and Mi-Gital by Christian Garos. It is that food which has
certain rules of commensality — no cooking takes place without keeping aside a fistful for the supernatual abiding spirit, no other food can be served first on the eating receptacle, no one can be served first except the one who has the highest status in a family etc. Even in the form of beer, one does not serve oneself, rather another serves it through the pong, the rice-beer receptacle.

In terms of prestige and value, meat occupies a unique position among the Garos. Many social scientists have argued that the primary motivation to eat meat is cultural. Such motivation is seen as driven by the powerful forms of symbolism which are attached to meat in many cultures. Thus, for example, Adams (1990) argues that the consumption of red meat in particular is associated with expressions of male identity, male power, and male domination of women. In a similar vein, Fiddes (1991) suggests that in Western thought and practice, the consumption of red meat is driven by the desire to express human power to dominate and exploit the natural world.

In the present study, it is seen that Garos find pride in stating that they have no food taboo and that they eat all animal food, ranging from wild animals to insects. In practice, however, it is noticeable that they actually do not eat every animal that moves even though that is the impression given by themselves. There are many varieties of animals, birds and insects that they do not consume. Do they try to express dominance over the natural world through such attempts? More research is required to accept or negate such a statement. However, Garos are seen to have a range of cultural reasons why meat is good for the body. For instance, jackal-meat is good for the brains (i.e., makes one intelligent) and dog-meat for protection against malevolent supernatural
forces. Meat occupies such an important position that it occurs in narratives and daily discourses often, such that it gives an impression of being a daily constituent of Garo diet. In actual practice it is not so with hunting of big game having totally disappeared in Askipara and dwindling alarmingly in Gohalkona. Garos can actually afford to eat meat only occasionally.

The amount and variety of meat consumed in communal gatherings assume prestigious connotations for the family, the clan and at times even the village. The number of cows and pigs slaughtered during the Christmas feasts in Gohalkona is an illustration of this.

Gastro-Politics in the Society
Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (1997:2) suggest that “food’s extraordinary ability to convey meaning as well as nourish bodies constitutes one source of its power.” This dual power of food is apparent both in Garo discourse and ritual practice: food nourishes the body and sustains social relationships. Mary Douglas’ (1997) discussion of the connection between the “two bodies” — the individual, biological body and the collective, social body — is particularly useful for understanding food in Garo ritual and social life. Food flows through the community via social networks and ritual symbols, giving concrete form to social relationships between people in the community, just as food flows through bodies nourishing them. In short, life-giving food, which sustains the biological body, also sustains, through reciprocal exchange, the social body.
Social precedence in the food cycle among Garos is based on age and sex with importance generally going to the older and male members of the family and clan. Domestic food transactions express to some extent the superiority of men largely through their priority in being served food first, the portions of food being served, the positions which they physically occupy in dining, and their detachment from the daily cooking process.

Men have a gradation among them too — the maternal uncle (*mama*) occupies the highest position. The older he is, the greater is his status compared to younger maternal uncles. Hierarchy among women is expressed in the management of the cooking process, which is organized on principles of seniority and affinity among the women. The husband’s relatives always rank higher, especially during wedding and funerary feasts and are hence accorded precedence in the serving and eating of food. In a wedding, since it is a marriage of two clans, the groom’s clan members and his family are given primacy. On the other hand, in the case of a funeral, the dead men are never disposed off without waiting for his family and clan members to arrive. This is also because, just as in marriage, in death also, families and clans are involved. Conversely, the wife’s relatives are treated as somewhat lower in rank under such ceremonial circumstances but as near equals under ordinary circumstances. Consanguine, both lineal and collateral, are also generally ranked in food transactions according to the criteria of age, sex and kinship distance.

Children of both sexes, whether from the family or outside, stand to some degree outside the arena in which the above rules are systematically applied. They are
often fed before anyone else. Their transgression of gastronomic proprieties is often tolerated. Their culinary whims are given as much play as possible within the broad constraints of the household budget and the boundaries of ritual propriety. However, between the ages of five and ten a sharp distinction begins to be made between boys and girls. While boys continue to demand preference in culinary etiquette, girls are increasingly socialized into the subordinate, service role that they must learn to occupy as future wives — fetching water, laying plates for dinner, serving water, serving salt and chilli and so on. The mother during this stage and later, sub-consciously on many occasions, starts serving the better portions to the boy-child. This is seen as trying to feed the boy-child properly now when he is still at home, as a few years hence he would no longer be a part of his family of orientation.

Gastro-Politics outside the Society

The relationship of Garos with their neighbouring non-Garos is seen to be a more or less “close and shut” case. Since non-Garos are not a part of their culture, I use the term “outside the society”.

Commensality between Garos and non-Garos is minimal. In Assam, non-Garos are never invited to eat/share meals for Garos believe and have learned through experience that the former will refuse to eat with them “cow-eaters”. In fact, as seen in the narrative of Silnapa, the tribal Rabhas, the ones supposedly free from caste structures, refused to enter the house of a Garo in Gohalkona on the occasion of clan meeting. Some members of one Rabha clan were invited for the said meeting for they
were believed to be affiliated to the particular Garo clan in question. This holds true even for converts to Christianity perhaps due to the fact that they are very recent converts and not yet able to integrate new things into their traditional cultures.

In both the studied villages Garos are very reluctant to let a non-Garo enter their homes and kitchen, even though a non-Garo might not have any food proscriptions. In fact, in Bangladesh, eating and drinking with non-Garos never takes place at home. In Assam, however, in some families where children have non-Garo friends, the visitors if invited, are offered non-Garo food for meals. The general practice is to offer tea and snacks to non-Garo guests outside the kitchen in the courtyard of the house. No exception is made to rich and influential non-Garo. However, non-Garo church leaders in both the places are offered specially prepared meals in the dining area away from the kitchen.

On ceremonial occasions such as Christmas and New Year in Gohalkona and Wanna in Askipara, all guests are invited to take part in the communal feasts. In Assam, there are only a handful of non-Garos participating whereas in Bangladesh participation is overwhelming. The Bengali Muslims of Askipara and nearby villages come to eat the tabooed cooked pork and drink chu, the rice-beer. On such occasions, rules of commensality are more or less relaxed.

In terms of food exchange, uncooked food is mostly the norm. In Gohalkona, uncooked food in the form of rice grains and occasionally vegetables pass hands from a Garo to a non-Garo. The latter are mostly daily wage labourers working in lieu of kind payment (rice) in the patal, the rice field, and a few traders. On the other hand, food
rarely passes hands from a non-Garo to a Garo except in shops and markets. Here too, uncooked food is the norm except perhaps for snacks like cooked gram, boiled eggs, *papad* and sweetmeats sold in the weekly market.

In both the villages under present study, the “order of things” is changing gradually as a result of the presence of markets. Most new foods are vegetable food items with very few changes noticed in meat and meat products. There is no change in the staple or core food.

Unfortunately in some imperceptible manner, the simple hunting and food gathering economy is shifting into the complex market economy. The earlier simple redistribution of food among kins and needy relatives is being replaced by Blurton-Jones’ “tolerated theft” concept (Blurton-Jones 1984). One of the reasons behind redistribution, according to Blurton-Jones, was because “the cost of defending food from another individual is greater than its fitness value to the acquirer”. In the present scenario, however, there is almost a pre-meditated decision about sharing food items and with whom to share depending on the returns both in kind or service.

The presence of the larger non-Garo population surrounding the Garos has also to some extent played its role in Garo foodways besides the ever-increasing role of media and the demanding time-schedules of modern lifestyle (for office-goers and school children). At the same time, in both Gohalkona and Askipara, Garos have been able to fasten themselves to their age-old foodways and food culture.
The Concept of “Garo Food”

Garos classify food in many ways. At times, the same food item is classified in several different ways. For instance, rice is the staple food as also the only core food and some varieties of it are considered indigenous. My goal in attempting a classification of food was not to detail a single cognitive map or cultural model of how different foods are classified and conceptualized by Garos but to explore the personal and ideological dimensions of these classification systems. Specifically, I argue that by assigning foods to ethnic categories (such as “Garo food”) Garos express self-identity and power.

Food, by itself, does not have an intrinsic identity. It is individuals and societies who choose what is eaten and identify themselves with a particular food thereby giving a particular food the identity of its consumers. Groups defined through ethnicity have real or imagined common origins and a vision of a shared destiny, which are manifested in terms of language, religion, marriage, family patterns and also food (Bradby 1997). Within an ethnic group there may be overlapping subdivisions of various interest groups based on caste, religion, locality or social status.

Ethnicity is born of acknowledged difference and works through contrast. Hence an ethnic cuisine is associated with a geographically and/or historically defined eating community (Lockwood and Lockwood 2000). But ethnicity, like nationhood, is also imagined (Murcott 1997) and associated cuisines may be imagined too. Once imagined, such cuisines provide added concreteness to the idea of national or ethnic identity.

In the present scenario, despite geographical and political boundaries, there exists the concept of “Garo Food” called Achik samjak in Assam and Mandi sobji in
Bangladesh. This is an abstract concept however having a concrete form — in the shape of food items that are so referred. The inventory of food items typically referred to as “Garo” run very much along the same lines albeit with minimal and imperceptible differences. Over and above the food items, it is the process of indigenous cooking with the addition of mineral salts and other condiments which is considered resoundingly “Garo” in nature.

*Kapa* and *pura* are two dishes that seem to have transcended tribal and geographical boundaries and assumed more or less a “national dish”\(^1\) stature. In writing about the development of national and haute cuisines, Mintz argues that these culinary traditions evolve in contexts where representation is paramount, “it is not easy to speak of a national cuisine unless we have in mind the contents of a book, a restaurant, or some particular nation, in contradistinction to some other” (1996: 96). Mintz suggests that national cuisines address a particular audience, one likely to be urban and powerful, “whose knowledge, taste, and means transcend locality” (1996: 96). A brief description of *kapa* and *pura* might come in handy at this point. *Kapa* is a style of cooking where the meat /vegetable is dry-fried in alkali without leaving any gravy whereas *pura* refers to pounded rice and in culinary styles it is used for making thick gravy and for giving “fullness” to an otherwise watery meat curry. Both are everyday and poor man’s meal, yet both transcend the everyday mundane cooking and assume special status in communal feasting. In a communal feast in Bangladesh besides the more famous pork curry cooked in oil, *kapa* makes an integral part. Important guests

\(^1\) By “national dish”, I mean, a dish that is common among all Garos irrespective of clan, gender and national boundaries.
are served with meat-\textit{kapa}, prepared specially for them whereas the majority consumes the intestine-\textit{kapa}. In Assam, on special occasions when Garo guests are invited for food, they are offered a dish of meat-\textit{kapa}.

**Choice of Food and Social Sanction**

Garos traditionally consume both beef and pork. In Gohalkona (Assam), the dominant culture is that of the Assamese, followed by the Rabhas, who have a taboo on beef consumption. There is a "ban" or taboo on open beef sale in the markets, even in the village weekly market which sits on Thursdays. However it is sold in the village square, albeit rarely. Perhaps due to non-frequent sale of beef, whenever a cow is slaughtered for food, the meat gets over immediately. On the other hand, pork is sold overtly in the weekly markets of Boko and Hahim as well as the village market. In comparison, pork is bought more often since it is more easily available. However, when it comes to ranking of food in terms of importance and choice, beef ranks over pork. Even when comfort food items are listed, the food most yearned is beef, in varied cooked forms — traditional curry, traditional dry-fry in alkali, intestines dry fry in alkali etc. The reason behind such a preference for beef over pork might be the infrequent availability of beef due to the taboo on open sale.

Contrastingly in Bangladesh beef is sold openly whereas pork is sold house to house in the village. Here too, as in Assam, there is a food taboo imposed by the dominant culture, the Bengali Muslims. However, unlike in Assam, the taboo is on pork consumption. Interestingly in Bangladesh, pork is considered an indigenous food item.
Here too, as narratives on comfort food and food cooked during Wanna suggest, the choice for pork over beef is overwhelming. The reasons behind such a phenomenon may lie on the intrinsic value attached to pork (an indigenous food item and therefore it is "good") and also due to the infrequent availability of pork in the market.

In short, social sanctions on a food type by a dominant culture leads to issues of easy availability or scarcity for that food item. A food item that is scarce is much sought-after and therefore there is more clamour for that particular food than one that is easily available. In Bangladesh, a list of prospective buyers is made even before the slaughter of a pig. On many occasions, the sale gets over even before it is slaughtered. In Assam too on many occasions, a similar prospective-buyer list is made before the actual slaughter and sale of beef. Therefore, with increase in social sanction on a food item, the choice for that particular food item grows manifold.

**Fig. 7.1**

**Co-relation between Food Sanction and Food Choice**
As Fig. 7.1 above suggests, when the degree of restriction on food increases, the degree of preference for that particular food too increases. Hence, there is a positive correlation between sanction on food and food choice.

**Concluding Remarks**

In the preceding pages I have tried to look into the problem of identity and difference among the Garos through the microcosm of food. I have tried to look into the issue from the perspective of the studied people, the Garos. Non-Garos have not been formally interviewed or studied.

Since the issues of identity and difference are intertwined with the social system, it is not possible to ignore some emergent problems in the studied areas. Fear of loss of ethnic identity is at present the most challenging situation the Garos in the two villages are facing. This fear has been spurred by the many liaisons taking place between Garo women and non-Garo men. The contention of Garo men is that many of these Garo women who have married non-Garo men and moved out of the family were educated and would have been an asset to the society. On the other hand, Garo women marrying non-Garo men and bringing the latter into the Garo fold are beset with a serious problem. Their husbands, who have moved into Garo homes as resident sons-in-law, have been a land-grabbing lot, especially in Bangladesh (and one singular case in Assam). Garo women are the owners of property, the ones through whom the family or clan name passes, but it is always men who have taken decisions on their behalf.
Incidentally, Garo men are also marrying non-Garo women but since they bring in their wives into the family fold, not much is said about them.  

My preliminary foray in Garo foodways have thrown up many problems that could be tackled by future researchers. Issues of identity and difference can be studied across religion — Christians and Songsareks. Again among the Christians too there are many denominations which have some impact on food habits. Issues of gender can also be looked into further in the area of changing economy. The art of cooking, serving and dining are very fascinating and have scope for further research. Finally, concept of “Garo Food” itself can be looked at as an evolving concept and in more detail than it has been possible in the present research.

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133 When a Garo man marries a non-Garo woman, another set of problems crop up — that of the clan. Will the children be called the children of the father’s clan? However, in many cases as in Gohalkona, this problem has been solved by adopting the non-Garo wife into the folds of another clan (in most cases, the father-in-law’s clan) and the children adopt the clan of the non-Garo mother, by default, the paternal grandfather’s clan.