

Feeding (and Eating)

Reflections on Strathern's 'Eating (and Feeding)'

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Drawing on Marilyn Strathern's comparative insights on eating and feeding, we explore the difference between giving food and eating together in Amazonia. These two elementary modes of alimentary life have often been conflated in the Amazonian literature. We distinguish between them by asking what these acts produce, what agentive capacities and perspectives they evince, and what kind of relationships they configure.

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Marilyn Strathern's article 'Eating (and Feeding)' in *Cambridge Anthropology* 30, no. 2 contains a double challenge for us. Not only does it display the author's usual sophistication and complexity of thought, but it also draws extensively on Amazonian materials, from people who are both our feeders and commensals. Having been invited to comment on Strathern's piece, we find ourselves in an inescapable convolution: how can we add more food to this chain? We take our inspiration from Strathern's final paragraph that itself invites us to 'consume one another's insights, feed each other with thoughts, recognizing their origins where we can' (Strathern 2012: 12). That is what we hope to do here: to try to 'feed' the author in return, reciprocating for the exquisite food she has provided us over the years.¹ We can only do that by coming back to our own region, and focusing on a topic which is central to Strathern's discussion of the Melanesian material, but which is under-theorized in the Amazonian one: what would feeding look like from an Amazonianist perspective?

In an article referred to by Strathern, one of us tried to articulate the studies on warfare predation with those on the fabrication of kinship, dealing with predation and commensality as distinct but dynamically articulated forms of producing persons and groups in Amazonia:

Many authors have already drawn attention to commensality as an identificatory device central to the fabrication of kinship in Amazonia. If making kin converges on the universe of culinary practices and food-sharing, the question becomes one of articulating two separate processes of transformation: one which results from eating someone (cannibalism), the other which results from eating *like* and *with* someone (commensality). (Fausto 2007: 500)



This insight developed from the perception that the notion of 'familiarizing predation' proposed in previous work (Fausto 1999a, 2001) needed to specify the way that persons appropriated on the outside were fabricated as kin on the inside. However, the formulation in terms of two forms of eating (cannibalism and commensality), which was deeply inspired by Vilaça's work (1992, 2000, 2002), obviates a further distinction: that between feeding and commensality.² Strathern's recent discussion now encourages us to explore the difference between giving food and eating together. What do these two acts produce? What kind of relationship is configured through feeding? Does it define differential agentic capacities and perspectives? Is feeding 'a question of belonging or mutual possession' (Strathern 2012: 2)? If yes, what kind of possession is invoked?

Instead of giving a general answer to these questions, we begin with an ethnographic example drawn from Costa's fieldwork among the Katukina-speaking Kanamari. These people inhabit the tributaries of the middle Juruá Valley, not far from the Brazil–Peru border. Ideally, each tributary is associated with a named, endogamous and localized sub-group. For the Kanamari, feeding and commensality imply two different but interdependent orientations towards others. The word for 'to feed [someone]' (*ayuh-man*) literally means 'to make [someone's] need'. Feeding provides for another what was previously unavailable. While the person who feeds causes a need, the one who is fed comes to need another. The Kanamari say that the participant who is fed is literally imbued with an 'internal necessity' (*-naki-ayuh*) towards the person who provides.

When the Kanamari define feeding, they often give the example of when a woman chews food, takes it from her mouth and places it in the mouth of a pet that she is raising.³ These pets are the young of wild animals hunted by men. Brought to the village, they are immediately made to accept this food. Mammals have all their teeth removed and are tied to a house-post, birds have their wings clipped and are kept warm in a loosely woven basket. The woman chews and provides manioc dregs, palm fruit or banana, which not only sustain her pet but also force upon it a change in diet.⁴ The result is a vital dependency, for the pet can no longer survive outside the emerging bond. One of the Kanamari words for their pets literally means 'that which we cause to grow/thrive'. The feeder is the source of its life (see Costa forthcoming).

Commensality is derived from feeding. The Kanamari word for commensality (*da-wihnin-pu*) can be glossed as 'to eat together'. The word for 'together' (*-wihnin*) also means 'kin', and commensality can equally be glossed as 'to eat as kin'. As in much of Amazonia, commensality for the Kanamari is part of a continual process of making kin. It is what happens to the feeding bond between a woman and her pet who, in time, come to 'love' (*wu*) each other, and who thus see their relation of feeding veer towards commensality. Pets who are named, who follow their owner everywhere and sleep in his or her hammock, are no longer regularly fed; instead they are allowed to take food from the plates of others, particularly from their owners. In Strathern's terms, 'a gloss of mutuality is put upon the unequal, asymmetrical relationship' (Strathern 1988: 90).

Likewise, while the newborn depends on its mother's ability to feed it, the child who gradually becomes a gender-identified producer no longer depends on his or her mother's feeding but on his or her own ability to eat with kin. The life-cycle takes a child from a dependency on another's feeding to a relation between productive adults as defined by the Kanamari gendered division of labour. Commensality involves

meals shared by fully productive adults – it results from relations that Gow (1991) has characterized as being of ‘mutual demand’.⁵

The ontogenetic process whereby the feeding of pets and newborns is slackened as they come to share meals with productive persons can only occur among people who are members of a sub-group and who inhabit its tributary. Within the sub-group there are two types of chiefs: the sub-group chief ensures the ritual regeneration of forest flora and fauna within his territory through his knowledge, while the village chief is the owner of a garden, the defining feature of villages. In both cases, these chiefs ‘feed’ their people. Any person’s ability to produce food and share meals is framed by the feeding relationship which, literally, creates the need from which kinship becomes possible. Commensality is thus derived from feeding not only when the latter blurs into the former as a single relationship develops through time, but also in terms of the structural parameters within which commensality occurs. Kinship cannot be produced voluntaristically by two people who wish to share a meal; it can only be produced by two people in the context of relations where both are subsumed under (that is, fed by) the same third party.

Feeding can be instated between people who stand in a variety of positions to each other: the chief of a village who owns a collective garden plot, the chief of a sub-group whose knowledge enables the regeneration of forest, but also a mother breastfeeding her newborn, a woman giving food to her pet or a shaman providing tobacco snuff for his spirits – all provide for others what would otherwise not be available and create the conditions for relations of commensality to ensue. Anyone who feeds another is the *-warah* of that other, a term that simultaneously means ‘body’, ‘owner’ and also ‘chief’ (Costa 2010). A body-owner always exists in an asymmetrical relation to those he or she feeds, containing their actions within his or her actions (Fausto 2008, 2012b; Costa 2009: 162–65). For the Kanamari, a solitary ‘body’ never materializes; body-owners are only referred to when they are the *loci* of activity – that is, when they act as agents in specific asymmetrical relations to others. A solitary person, one who, for example, becomes lost in the forest and is not fed by another, lacks a body-owner, and resembles less a human person and more an errant soul. Unfed and incapable of feeding, they also become incapable of entering into kinship relations with others. The Kanamari say that such people are *dyaba*, ‘worthless’.

The Kanamari case is particularly interesting for three reasons: first, a single word applies to both the position of an owner-master-chief and to the body; second, it clearly links the enactment of mastery relations to the act of giving food; finally, this relation is conveyed through an imagery of containment. To feed is hence to contain that which is fed; to be fed is to be inserted in a relation with a body-owner. This is a recurrent image in Amazonia, almost always expressed in terms of feeding relations: chiefs contain and feed their people; shamans store their auxiliary spirits inside baskets or in their own body and feed them with tobacco; the masters of animals keep their ‘children’ in enclosures, and gradually release them to feed humans. What kind of relationship is established through giving food?

In the *Gender of the Gift*, Strathern writes: ‘the fed person is put into a passive condition. Feeding establishes the “claim” of the agent on him or her who will register the act’ (Strathern 1988: 290). The one who feeds is the agent, who acts to displace

something from the other who is fed. But what is being displaced when the latter eats the food provided by the feeder? In the Amazonian case, what dies in this act is the condition of being kin to other people, and what emerges is the possibility of becoming kin to the feeder. In the 1940s, an enemy boy captured in a raid by the Tupi-speaking Parakanã tried to escape. He was followed and seized. Before finishing him off, his killer-to-be admonished him in a tone of lament: 'I told you to eat the tapir that I had hunted, that's what I told you in vain' (Fausto 2012a: 159).

The displacement of the fed person's condition as 'another person' is equivalent to the diminishing of her agentivity. Her otherness is tamed, and she cannot act out of her own volition. The Parakanã term for 'pet', which also applies to the enemies familiarized in dreams, is *te'omawa* which comes from *-e'omam*, 'to be completely forceless', a condition which applies to someone about to faint or die. The pet is 'that which lost its force', which relinquishes its own perspective to its owner (*-jara*). Among the Nivakle of the Chaco, the same idea is conveyed by the notion of *nitôiya*:

The term *nitôiya*, translated into Spanish as 'manso' [tame] is the negative of *tôiyi*: 'good (persons), right, ferocious, wild (animal)' ... These apparently contradictory glosses become intelligible when we consider that *tôiyi* derives from *tôî*: 'to have consciousness, knowledge, power, be self-aware, remember'. Thus, a 'right' animal is one that 'has consciousness' of what it is: it appears *tôiyi*, wild and ferocious. A *nitôiya* or captive animal is an 'unconscious' animal. (Sterpin 1993: 59–60)

The term is applied to a number of situations, and specifically to characterize the process through which a killer familiarizes his victim's spirit during seclusion. But if the *nitôiya* person does not recognize itself as an *other* person, how do we reconcile this with Viveiros de Castro's hypothesis about ontological predation in Amazonia as an appropriation of alterity or of the enemy's perspective (Viveiros de Castro 1992)? As we have shown elsewhere, familiarizing is not only a risky enterprise (since one can always lose one's own perspective in the process), it is also always an unfinished business: one hardly ever completely extinguishes the alterity of the other (be it children, pets, victims or spirits). Moreover, to completely 'alienate' the pet from his perspective serves nothing, since 'to be powerful, shamans and warriors can never fully control their wild pets, having to ensure the subjective condition of the other and run the risk of losing their own' (Fausto 1999a: 949).

Such constitutive ambiguity, which characterizes plural persons in Amazonia (people who contain other people in an asymmetric relation), destabilizes our previous definition of an agent. Drawing on the *Gender of the Gift*, we affirmed that the feeder-container is the one who acts and the fed-contained the one who registers the act. But who is the agent in the Araweté warrior's song: the killer or his victim (Viveiros de Castro 1992)? Who is the Parakanã curer: the dreamer or the dreamt enemy (Fausto 2001)? Who is the genitor of the Wari' killer's baby: the killer or the enemy who impregnates him upon being killed (Vilaça 1992; Conklin 2001)? In general terms: who is the cause of the action and who is acting? To Amazonian eyes, this conflation of more than one agency in one body is a source of power and defines this body as an owner-container: 'in other words, eaters as agents eat *of* others (the others' agency)

what they also evince (the acts of others towards them are also an outcome of their own agency)' (Strathern 2012: 11).

The examples above represent situations where the plural composition of the person is made clearer. We are talking about powerful people, masters of powerful others. But the same scheme also applies to more prosaic situations, where the dynamic of feeding and being fed is made evident, as shown in the Kanamari example. McCallum states for the Pano-speaking Kashinawá: 'the notion "leader" is a summation and intensification of the notion of adult person. A fine man should be able to feed all those with whom he lives and works; and a fine woman likewise' (McCallum 2001: 70). However, if a fine leader is someone who feeds his people well, being fed always opens one up to a certain risk, as Strathern (2012) notes. It opens one to the agency of the person who feeds. Conceptually, the possibility of becoming prey (being eaten) is thus only a further step from the hazard of being fed, since both configure an asymmetric relationship between two subjects. Of course, practically, it makes a lot of a difference whether one is made a 'pet' or 'prey'. As Bonilla (2005, 2009) has argued for the Arawá-speaking Paumari, putting oneself in the condition of a pet in relation to a powerful other is a strategy for avoiding actual predation – and it was precisely the strategy they adopted towards the whites and their goods (see also Walker 2012).

In accepting to be fed, one avoids being preyed upon, since Amazonian peoples hardly ever eat their own pets (Erikson 2000). But there are ways of circumventing this: you can sell or give pets to a third party, or you can transform them back again into potential prey. The Parakanã dreamer, for instance, must give his pet-song to another person who will sing-execute it in the ritual. The Tupinambá, who fed their captives for months, had to remake them into enemies before killing and eating them. They had to turn them back into ferocious persons in order for the killer to appropriate their excess of agency (and for others to eat their flesh). What had been displaced in the months during which a captive was fed had to be reinstated in him: he had to play the enemy again, try to escape and be caught once more, and exact an anticipated vengeance against his future executioners (Fausto 1999b, 2012a). In the condition of a pet, his alterity could not be appropriated, since he was contained by another body. On being fed he was placed into another perspectival position and only his reconfiguration as enemy could restore his own perspective.

The Amazonian idiom for conceptualizing the feeder–fed relationship is one of ownership or mastery (Fausto 2008). The feeder possesses the one he or she feeds. This cannot be characterized as mutual possession, since there is a marked asymmetry in the relation (though an ambivalent one). That is why we have tried here to distinguish feeding from commensality: giving food to contain the other within one's body is not the same as eating together to be jointly part of the same body.

Notes

1. We would like to thank Aparecida Vilaça and Marcela Coelho de Souza for reading and commenting on this paper.
2. Let us observe, from the start, that much of our argument probably does not apply to the Chapakuran-speaking Wari' studied by Vilaça. According to Vilaça, the Wari' do not distinguish feeding from commensality, nor do they put emphasis on mastery relations. Vilaça stresses the potentially

reversible relation between predator and prey, whereas we emphasize here the asymmetric, concentric relationship produced by predation and/or feeding. It remains to be seen how much variation exists across Amazonia pertaining to this issue.

3. Among Tukanoan-speaking peoples, the term for pets is 'those whom we feed' (Hugh-Jones, personal communication) or 'fed animals' (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1978: 252). The Huaruani of Amazonian Ecuador call their pets *queninga*, which means 'that who is fed' or 'that who has received food from humans' (Rival 1999: 79).
4. In some instances, women also breastfeed mammalian pets, as in the case of infant monkeys among the Tupi-speaking Guajá (Cormier 2003: 114).
5. This does not mean that the act of 'giving food' is necessarily eclipsed in the relation between productive adults: among the Ge-speaking Kinsedje (Suyá), the husband is the 'owner' (*kande*) of the meat whereas the wife is the 'owner' of the manioc bread. They both provide each other with gendered food (Coelho de Souza, personal communication).

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