

Cheap Meat: Flap Food Nations in the Pacific Highlands

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By Deborah Gewertz and Frederick Errington

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Review by Emily Yates-Doerr, NYU Anthropology

A half-dozen strips of white, greasy fat, with a few thin lines of blood-red flesh running through them— this is the image on the cover of *Cheap Meat: Flap Food Nations in the Pacific Islands*. One can't, perhaps, judge a book by its cover. But in the case of Deborah Gewertz and Frederick Errington's latest book – which could easily become a food studies classic – the cover is instructive. The authors suggest that the appearance of this cheap meat typically elicits a response of disgust. Moreover it is this common response that makes flaps an unusual material commodity as they resist Marx's notion of fetishization (the straightforward equation of value with price). Instead of appearing as disconnected from the processes of production through which they emerge, the image of the "cheap, fatty, and undesirable cut of meat... evokes the labor processes of killing and dismembering that went into them" (p. 27). Flaps additionally, Gewertz and Errington argue, resist fetishization of consumption; because they are a widely stigmatized meat, they do not hide, but draw attention to the persisting inequalities between those who eat and those who eschew the fatty meat. Flaps, already embroiled in local controversies, "encourage people to think about the broader historical relationships that make them" (p. 28).

In this easily readable, but nonetheless ambitious book, Gewertz and Errington apply their longstanding interest in change in Papua New Guinea to the controversies surrounding the sale and purchase of lamb and mutton fat among, what they call, "Flap Food Nations." They suggest that flaps embody numerous ambiguities about post-colonial relations between the Pacific Islands (specifically Papua New Guinea, Fiji, and Tonga) and Australia and New Zealand. Although they are a tasty and important source of nutrition for many Pacific Islanders, they are also widely seen as "by-products", "dumped" upon the poor by wealthier nations. Furthermore, given an escalating incidence of obesity in the Pacific Islands, flaps – themselves more than 50% fat – have come to represent the high prevalence of dietary related illnesses: diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, etc. Gewertz and Errington suggest that because of their complicated symbolism, flaps function akin to totems, marking group membership— in this case third world eaters and first world refusers. This totemic quality of flaps additionally references inextricable relations of dependency, indexing those who live in a second-rate modernity in which they rely upon a second-rate source of food. *Cheap Meat* follows "the flow of flaps" (p. 8) in order to explore how a "cheap, fatty meat ends up only in certain places and only in certain bodies" (p. 40). The authors begin their exploration of the "global omnivore's dilemma" (118) – that is, how to choose what to eat – in New Zealand and Australia, countries where flaps are either rejected or used for pet food. Gewertz and Errington are refreshingly transparent about their methodologies and always forthright about the complexities of their anthropological commitments. They carefully detail their visits to (dis)assembly slaughterhouses, where low-value flaps are separated from high value loins and racks (flaps are the only part of the sheep that needs no further processing, and, because they are a "cheap

meat,” they are simply sawed apart and stuffed into bags or cartons without regard for aesthetic presentation). Although flaps constitute just 3-5% of a carcass’s value, because margins of profit for meat production are low, flaps must be sold for the producers to make money. Rather than demonize the “middle men” of the meat trade who are responsible for arranging the export of “cheap meat” to poorer Pacific Island countries, Gewertz and Errington describe the traders they interview as “the commercial corollary of anthropologists” (p. 54). To achieve desired sales, these traders – many of whom operate “at the bottom of the market” (p. 70) – are required to cultivate considerable knowledge about and ties within the communities where they work.

By the second half of the book, when this multi-sited study of globalism moves to the Pacific Islands, the authors have succinctly presented their readers with an important history of the recent origins of the production and inter-island trade of flaps. This history illuminates another ambiguity entailed in the sale of flaps: unlike many “traditional,” so-called “ethnic” fatty foods (lardo in Italy, chitlins in the US south, or even the brined brisket consumed in the Papua New Guinea), flaps are a recently introduced commodity without much cultural cache. Gewertz and Errington carefully point out that poorer Pacific Islanders depend upon flaps as a source of affordable calories, that street vendors rely upon their sale, and that many of their informants (surveyed in their study by local anthropology students) described flaps as enjoyable, convenient, and filling. Yet their informants overwhelmingly viewed flaps as sub-par to the local delicacy of pig, and even those Pacific Islanders who depend on flaps for sustenance saw them as a troubling representation of the structural inequalities between first world producers and third world consumers. As the authors write: “Papua New Guineans do know – and do remain concerned by the fact – that lamb and mutton flaps are rejected by white people” (p. 108). Although Australian and New Zealand producers defended their trade with statements such as, “One person’s trash was bound to be another’s treasure” (p. 73), Pacific Islanders were unsettled by their consumption of goods they knew others had rejected. In exploring this controversy, *Cheap Meat* convincingly demonstrates that in the case of flaps, “Conversion of trash to treasure may become, over time, an increasingly compromised alchemy” (p. 95).

In the last two chapters of the book (“Pacific Island Flaps” and “One Supersize Does Not Fit All”) the authors engage most directly with the public health crisis that shadows their study. They use two Pacific Islands as case studies: Fiji, which banned the sale of flaps in 2000, and Tonga, where public health officials estimate that 60% of those aged 15 and older are obese. In Fiji, the government began to regulate against flaps as a means to protect the health of its citizens (despite the challenge this ban posed to the neoliberal free-trade stipulations of the World Trade Organization, it was locally defended as a public-health corollary to other countries’ regulations of food safety). While the authors raise important questions about potential limits of public health, and point out that the ban has done little to curtail rates of obesity and may have even harmed those who are undernourished and protein-deprived, they also laud the Fijian government for showing itself to be “committed to and capable of” taking steps to address the public health concerns of its citizens (p. 119).

Gewertz and Errington explore numerous public health measures aimed at obesity prevention in Fiji and Tonga. For example, they describe a televised public health commercial that follows flaps as they move from congealed fat to a blocked artery to a man’s stroke. They also detail a church

scene where a Pentecostal preacher publically weighs his parishioners while encouraging them to treat their bodies as temples of God. Their analysis entails a trenchant critique of the “just do it” (152) narratives of consumer choice and individual responsibility that drive many discussions of obesity prevention. They point out that given widespread (and increasing) market inequalities, not all citizens have the same range of opportunities and so not all consumers are equally capable of making “healthy” choices. In the beginning of *Cheap Meat*, the authors said that due to the ethical concerns underlying their research they felt obligated to weigh in with policy recommendations. It is at the end of the book that they do so, and they conclude their study by suggesting that while it would be unreasonable to expect first world countries (New Zealand and Australia) to restrict their export of flaps, poorer countries like Tonga or Fiji should not be prevented from taking actions – perhaps in the form of food bans – to protect the public health of their citizens. “Good food choices,” they suggest, “must be made as easy as possible” (p. 164).

Overall, *Cheap Meat* is a compelling and informative read, which could be assigned to undergraduate courses on culture and food in any discipline. It would also complement introductory anthropology course syllabi, as it cogently engages with the dilemmas confronting modern-day multi-sited ethnographic research. In studying the global flows of a commodity food across numerous nations, and by linking this food to the weight and health of people’s bodies, the authors are, admittedly, tackling a huge project. Any one of their chapters might have been an entire study, and the book as a whole is a formidable analysis of a complex and increasingly significant public health concern. Because of this, I will not provide concluding criticism typical of book reviews, but will instead suggest areas that might be elaborated upon in further research.

My research on the “nutrition transition” in Guatemala focuses on perceptions of dietary health and changing corporeal ideals, and – likely because of this – the sections of *Cheap Meat* that I found especially compelling were those that explored the local dilemmas that Pacific Islanders have experienced in their reliance on the consumption of “cheap meat.” While the authors argue that fatty meat is stigmatized (even among people who enjoy it), further research might usefully explore whether, and in what circumstances, this stigmatization extends to fat bodies. We learn that the former King of Tonga was the “world’s most enormous monarch” (p. 50) weighing in at up to 462 pounds. We are also told that the corporeal bulk of PNG politicians indexes their power and privilege (even if illegitimate and disproportionate). The authors suggest that fatness among the Mari was amusing and a source of “good natured banter” (113). In all of these descriptions fatness has positive and even desirable connotations. Yet they also tell us that an estimated 15% of girls in Fiji – caught between familial pressures to eat, and societal and governmental pressures for thinness – are reported to have “patterns of disordered eating” (p. 140). It would be interesting to examine the circumstances through which body fat becomes undesirable, and the strategies of weight management employed in response. If Pacific Island elite, who can afford “luxury” low-calorie foods, have begun to diet, how is this affecting post-colonial understandings of what constitutes proper eating, proper body form, and – by extension – inclusion in national bodies? In this vein, further studies might explore existing and emerging national stratifications that form around fat meat and fat bodies. The authors describe flaps as embodying a “diffuse social anxiety” about the international inequalities between first and third world countries. To what degree might they also embody, or come to embody, anxieties about local inequalities? I also wonder: Although

thinness and health are increasingly conflated in public discourse, is weight regulation in fact becoming the individualized moral problem in the Pacific Islands that is it in many western countries? While the authors devote critical attention to public health and commercial discourses that frame consumption of fatty meat as a “lifestyle” matter and encourage individual responsibility, further studies might explore how these understandings of fat are actually taken up in people’s lives and everyday practices. Given the longstanding anthropological emphasis on Melanesian relationality, it would be instructive to know how Pacific Islanders are adopting, resisting, or transforming public health narratives of personal responsibility.

Finally, I would like to learn more about the understandings of dietary and bodily health that exist in the rural communities where many of the now-urban field informants of Cheap Meat originate. Gewertz and Errington briefly discuss notions of care in Fiji, where a local word, *Vikawaitaki*, implies food exchange and feeding and is understood to emerge in bodily form. *Vikawaitaki* (care) both figuratively and materially “marks the body with the record of its success” (p. 139). Given that global public health programs often standardize terms like “health,” “care,” “nourishment,” “nutrition,” and “diet,” an exploration of the local nuances of these ideas – as well as the practices through which they gain their meanings – in places where public health campaigns are still marginal, strikes me as a potentially valuable extension to what is already a valuable and impressive study.