



THE SEMIOTICS OF TABOOED FOOD: SHOKLENG (GÊ)

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1. PROBLEM-FOCUS

Ross (1978) distinguishes two perspectives on food taboos, which he labels "mentalist" and "materialist". My own work may be reasonably classed with the former. What I hope to show is how the conceptual tools supplied by semiotic theory, and especially the theory of markedness, can illuminate the problem of edibility restrictions. I argue that food taboos, in one of their possibly multiple functions, serve essentially communicative ends.<sup>1</sup> Taken as a set, the food taboos of a society constitute a more or less complex signal system, sufficiently powerful to specify status within some matrix of social categories. They therefore properly form a part of "culture", conceived as the shared means of communication employed by a society.

By adopting this perspective, I do not mean to withdraw comfortably from the so-called mentalist/materialist debate. On the contrary, by analyzing the rich and highly intricate internal structure of a single edibility code--that of the GÊ-speaking Shokleng Indians of Brazil--I hope to show for just how much an adequate "explanation" of food taboos must account. None of us, I am sure, doubts that ecological factors place some constraints on culturally constituted edibility codes. Of course, the sensible model is one involving two interacting hierarchies of determination, that supplied, on the one hand, by nature, and, on the other, by culture. What I hope to demonstrate, however, is that the specifics of a given edibility code are so intricate that only a theory possessing the richness and delicacy of semiotic theory can be sufficiently fine-tuned to account for them.

In arguing for a semiotic approach, I emphasize simultaneously that I am not espousing some variant of what might be labelled the "classificationist" perspective. I mean that perspective, encapsulated so

nicely in the work of Leach (1964), wherein tabooed species are viewed as the anomalies within an ethnobiological classification scheme. I hope indeed to show the distinctiveness of a semiotic approach, which views the taboo itself as a sign, and thus considers only its requirements within a signal system.

So as to focus the problem at hand, let me distinguish a number of questions that might be asked regarding food taboos. We could ask (1) why there should be food taboos at all. What purpose (i.e., ecological, cultural, psychological and so forth) do they serve? (2) we could ask why the taboo applies to just those persons to whom it applies, i.e., to members of certain age, sex, or segmentary categories, or to members of the entire community.<sup>2</sup> (3) we could ask why only certain classes of food should be tabooed, e.g., certain species, or certain cuts of meat, or foods prepared in a certain way.<sup>3</sup> Finally, (4) we could ask about the significance of ethnotheories natives elaborate about their food taboos. Do they play some positive role, or are they simply "rationalizations"?

Now I think it is obvious that various studies have focussed implicitly on certain of these questions, to the exclusion of others. Thus, Ross (1978) deals entirely with (1) and (3), ignoring altogether (2) and (4). What I wish to make clear at the outset is that this paper is as well limited in scope. My concern is primarily with the first three questions. While I believe that the question of ethno-theoretic conceptions can be handled within the framework of semiotics, and I suggest as much subsequently, nevertheless, I consider it in need of a somewhat separate treatment.

2. THE SEMIOTIC FRAMEWORK

Let me now sketch briefly the rudiments of a semiotic approach to edibility codes. My argument is that dietary restrictions serve to "index" or point to those to whom the restriction applies. Taboos thus serve to "mark" certain classes of individuals, and so may be investigated within the context of markedness theory, deriving from the Prague school linguists, which makes use of such notions as "privative" and "equipollent" marking. I will take up this investigation subsequently (Sections 3 and 4). What is important here is the observation that food taboos are, whether by design or

CEDI - P. I. B.  
DATA 31 / 12 / 86  
COD. XG.D02

Borrowed from College  
Warrent, ERB

In Working Papers on South American Indians

Nº 3, August 1981.

Food Taboos in Lowland South America  
Kenneth N. Ken Slinger and Naud H. Kracke, editors

chance, signs, and so they become organized in some measure willy nilly into a signal system.

Moreover, food taboos are, as conceptualized within semiotic theory, a specific type of sign, which Peirce (1940:107-11) called an "index". This is one of the types within his trichotomy of signs--the remaining two being the "icon" and "symbol". That is, food taboos are signs having a necessary spatiotemporal connection with what is signalled. And their character as indices lends to them certain constraints as to signalling use. Thus, they may be used for marking or discriminating various aspects of the world, such as the social class membership of individuals, but they cannot combine so as to encode more properly propositional content. The edibility code per se is thus highly circumscribed as regards its possible use as a signal system.

From my point of view, what is most striking about taboos is that the class of individuals for whom a taboo applies is never conceptualized as an arbitrary class. Instead, it is invariably a class whose membership reflects some underlying social category. Consequently, the edibility code as a signal system can be viewed as functional relative to an underlying system of social categories. Moreover, insofar as that latter system is hierarchically organized into component subsystems, as I argue elsewhere (Urban 1978) is the case for Shokleng, so too must the signal system be analyzed as multitiered. This is what I attempt in what follows. What I call Level-I analysis deals with markedness relations within component subsystems of social categories, e.g., the age-category system or the moiety system. Level-II analysis deals with the hierarchically superior markedness relations obtaining between component subsystems. Finally, I note that food taboos apply only to what I call 1-place categories, that is, classes whose membership consists of individuals. They do not apply at all, and for obvious reasons, to 2-place or relational categories. Consequently, we can perhaps envision a Level-III analysis beyond the first two.

### 3. LEVEL-I ANALYSIS: THE SHOKLENG EDIBILITY CODE

Let me turn now to the Level-I analysis of markedness relations within various "subsystems" of social categories in Shokleng. I will need to distinguish, following the Prague school theorists (e.g., Trubetzkoy 1939), two types of marking, namely, "privative" and "equipollent". By "privative

marking, I mean a situation wherein only a single overt signal is used in differentiating a two-term set. One term will thus be "marked", as in those English noun plurals marked by a final voiced or voiceless grooved alveolar fricative, and one term will be "unmarked", as in English noun singular forms. A marked term is thus juxtaposed with an unmarked term. In "equipollent" marking, in contrast, each of the terms to be differentiated is marked by a separate overt signal. I will argue in what follows that Level-I marking of social categories in Shokleng is primarily or exclusively privative, at least insofar as the edibility code is concerned. Equipollent marking is confined to Level-II.

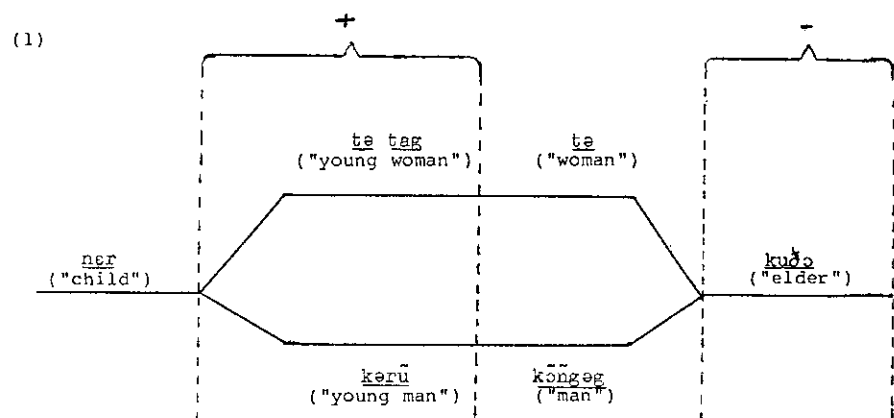
Thus, one key component subsystem of categories is the binarily contrastive set Shokleng/non-Shokleng, or, translating more literally the native terms, "human beings"/"non-human beings". Taking the taboo itself as the overt signal, "human beings" is here the marked term. For Shokleng consider inedible or "repulsive" (*dãgrãg*) certain species, namely, lizards and various snakes, that they know to be eaten by non-Shokleng in the region, e.g., by Tupian-speaking tribes and by local Brazilians. Incidentally, it is true that Brazilian settlers consider the large lizards found in that region a special delicacy. To the Shokleng mind, this is a sure sign of barbarism.<sup>4</sup> In any case, if we treat the taboo as a signal, it is evident that we have here an instance of privative marking.

There are two other privatively-marked binary categorial subsystems. One is the male/female contrast, wherein "female" is the marked term. For women are explicitly prohibited from eating the meat of armadillos and soft-tailed armadillos, as well as eagles, falcons, and other birds of prey. Men are under no such restriction. Consequently, taking the taboo as overt signal, "male" is the unmarked term. The second subsystem consists of the eastern/western moiety contrast, wherein "western" is the marked term. Members of this latter moiety are prohibited from eating the meat of large and small anteaters, capibaras, and various of the smaller cats. No such taboos apply to members of the eastern moiety. We thus have once again a marked/unmarked contrast.

A final major subsystem is that of the age-grade categories, where markedness relations are somewhat more complex. For we are dealing here not with a simple binary system, but instead with an ordered series of

categories. Nevertheless, and precisely because the system is ordered, we can conceptualize it in terms of binary contrasts. Thus, we can imagine that any two adjacent categories constitute a binary set, and so argue that, when all of the constituent binary sets have been accounted for, in terms of privative or equipollent marking, the linear system itself is adequately marked.

Now such is, or so I argue, just what we encounter in connection with the Shokleng age-grade system. (1) depicts a structural model of this system, showing parallels between the male and female grades.<sup>5</sup>



Collapsing the male/female distinction, we have four-term linear system, which may be represented as ABCD, corresponding to the roughly glossed series: "child"- "young person"- "adult"- "elder".

What we find are two instances of marking. First, there are taboos applying only to members of the "young person" age grade. These individuals must refrain from eating agouti and paca, and as well all of those foods prohibited for members of the western moiety, and some of those considered taboo for women. The result is a situation in which B is marked as opposed to A, on the one side, and C, on the other. We thus have the contrasts A/B/CD, where only C and D are left undiscriminated. The second set of taboos handles this. For D is opposed to ABC by virtue of the "elders" being permitted to eat certain foods prohibited for everyone else. Such seems to be the case, anyway, for jaguar meat. We thus have D as the

unmarked term, contrasting with marked ABC.<sup>6</sup> And so all of the constituent binary sets of this linear system are privatively marked, leading us to conclude that the edibility code indeed functions adequately as a mechanism for signalling underlying categorial distinctions within this component subsystem.

I have now discussed nearly all of the 1-place categorial subsystems of the Shokleng system.<sup>7</sup> Before turning to a Level-II analysis, however, I note that this approach applies to yet another class of food taboos. I mean those associated with so-called "liminal phase" restrictions, e.g., in Shokleng, sickness and mourning. Indeed, this latter, which entails a prolonged seclusion, is surrounded by an especially dense cluster of prohibitions, which I argue act as a powerful signal, highlighting the distinctiveness of this phase vis-à-vis everyday social life. Now what I wish to remark upon is simply this: whereas an ecological analysis requires distinct (and perhaps ad hoc) explanations for each distinct "type" of taboo, a semiotic analysis integrates these phenomena into a single framework: the same general principles of sign functioning may be seen to operate everywhere.

#### 4. LEVEL-II ANALYSIS

Level-I analysis supplies a partially adequate answer to the question: "why does a taboo apply to just those persons to whom it applies". My argument has been that food taboos function to signal categorial distinctions within component subsystems of social categories. Indeed, the edibility code neatly marks virtually all of the component subsystems. Of course, there are in each case alternative ways that the signals could have been set up. Nevertheless, the particular system employed by Shokleng can be seen to meet quite nicely the requirements of discriminative marking. But Level-I analysis tells us nothing about the third question: "why are only certain classes of food tabooed?"

Indeed, staying within the confines of Level-I analysis, which here focusses primarily on privative marking in binarily contrastive sets, nothing can be said about this question. For in each binary set there need be only one signal, and the sole requirement for that signal is that it be cognitively discriminable. Discrete signals need not enter into systems of



animal species. Such is indeed what we find in Shokleng. /2/, /4/, and /5/ contrast nicely as "mammals" versus "birds" versus "reptiles".<sup>8</sup>

Correspondingly, we should expect equipollent marking of Level-I contrast to correlate with minimal distinctiveness of the animal species. Unfortunately, Shokleng Level-1 contrast is overwhelmingly privative. But we can readily look for confirmation to a much broader class of familiar phenomena. I mean the use of so-called "totemic emblems" for distinguishing moieties and clans. Perhaps most familiar are the Australian examples, where we have such contrasts as "white cockatoo"/"black cockatoo" (Radcliffe-Brown 1929:118), or "eagle hawk"/"crow", or "hill kangaroo"/"long-legged kangaroo". Another familiar example from the North American Northwest Coast region is the "raven"/"bluejay" contrast. But we need not go so far afield as this. Provided that we are prepared to view totemic patterns as part of a truly broad-spectrum semiotic phenomenon, we can find the principle operative in Ge-land itself. Hence, the oft-cited contrasts "sun"/"moon", "up"/"down", and "east"/"west". Indeed, this last contrast is used by the Shokleng themselves. In each case, what we have are highly similar species or "terms", differentiated in perhaps just one respect, just as the underlying categories themselves are maximally similar.

By entertaining this hypothesis, we come considerably closer to specifying just what species are tabooed. We know that they must be chosen from certain classes. This of course by no means constitutes a complete "explanation". But it is just about as close as Ross (1978) comes, in his discussion of "big" versus "small" animals, and so forth. Moreover, we must allow that the choice of species is, within certain more or less precise constraints, in some measure arbitrary. In any case, the semiotic approach discussed thus far can take us only so far.

##### 5. ON THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE

My assumption in this paper has been that edibility restrictions manifest themselves in actual ("objective") conduct. Moreover, I have assumed that it is this conduct, as broadly conceived, that constitutes the signal. Obviously, however, such taboos are also, in Shokleng anyway, "linguistic" phenomena. That is, they are expressed in linguistically encoded rules, and they are surrounded by linguistically formulated

ethnotheoretic conceptions.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, these conceptions are a key component of their "cultural dimension".<sup>10</sup> Language is thus clearly an important factor in connection with food taboos.

Indeed, I have implicitly suggested as much in arguing for the proximity hypothesis. For I suspect that "distinctiveness" is probably distinctiveness relative to a semantic space. Of course, it is always possible that there is a natural substratum for such distinctiveness. But it seems likely that a thorough investigation of this hypothesis--which is, however, much beyond the scope of this present work--will lead us into the semantics of language itself.

At yet another analytical level are the ethnotheoretic notions that can be conveyed only through language. Thus, Shokleng are able to say, for most dietary restrictions, what consequences would befall a transgressor. Most of these turn out to involve an "iconic" (or what used to be called "sympathetic") connection between the species and supposed consequence, where the latter must be restricted to members of a certain category. Thus, Shokleng say that eating paca or agouti meat would cause the teeth of a "young person" to grow too rapidly, and so to ache. Now it happens that agouti and paca, as large rodents, are notable for the size of their incisors.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, it is only in the "young person" category that the growth of permanent teeth is a factor. Consequently, there is here a quasi-natural fit between sign vehicle, consequence, and entity signalled. One may entertain the hypothesis, indeed, that food tabooing in Shokleng is constrained by the semiotic capacity of speakers to draw such appropriate connections. In any case, it is obvious here as well that language plays a key role in connection with food taboos.

##### 6. CONCLUSIONS

Edibility codes must surely assume a position of importance for social theorists. For, on the one hand, they embody something of what is unique to a specific culture, and thereby are evidence for "the principle of variability". Yet simultaneously, on the other hand, they are at the junction between nature and culture. One must eat to maintain himself as a biological organism. But in the matters of what he eats and how, in these matters culture can act as a determinant.



Now no one can seriously deny that a food taboo may have ecological consequences. This is especially so in the case of so-called "general" taboos, such as Ross (1976) considers. My argument is only that the functions of edibility codes far transcend their purely ecological functions.<sup>12</sup> Food taboos as signals as well mediate the relations between members of society, by signalling categorial status. They function as sign vehicles. And I submit that no one can seriously deny this function of edibility codes as well. For the Shokleng edibility code anyway seems constructed in conformity with the constraints, such as markedness, on semiotic codes generally.

It is precisely when viewed as a component of culture, not simply as a "reflex" of material conditions, that the true complexity and richness of an edibility code emerges. Not only does a food taboo exist as actual, objective conduct. Simultaneously, it subsists in and through language, linking up with the ethnotaxonomy of a "semantic field", and also with the broadly ethnotheoretic notions, expressible only by means of language, that serve to make sense of it. This I submit is the best argument for continuing to view food taboos as quintessentially cultural phenomena.

## NOTES

- 1 I consider it indisputable, as Ross (1978) contends, that food taboos have ecological consequences, and so can be profitably analyzed within the framework of an ecosystem perspective. Indeed, maintenance of species population levels may be one of the multiple "functions" of edibility restrictions. My purpose is not to deny any validity to the ecosystem approach. It is instead to assert that they may also be profitably analyzed and in certain respects more profitably analyzed, within the framework of a semiotic approach.
- 2 Ross (1978:1, f.n. 2), following Basso (1973:16), distinguishes "general taboos", which apply to an entire community, from "specific taboos", which apply to only certain subclasses within society. He states explicitly that he is concerned only with the former. And with good reason. For "specific" taboos constitute the most important evidence in favor of a non-materialist analysis, such as the semiotic analysis I propose here. Of course, ad hoc ecological arguments can be constructed for specific taboos pertaining to certain quasi-natural classes, such as age and sex classes. Basso (1978) actually attempts as much. But for such taboos as apply to intrinsically social classes, such as one, but not the other, of the Shokleng moieties, any serious ecological explanation seems impossible. Moreover, there is the complementary argument that a semiotic analysis makes very good sense of these, within the context of a systematic approach.
- 3 In the Shokleng case, one specific taboo applies to a certain "cut" of tapir meat. Such taboos make it evident that we are not dealing simply with species-wide restrictions, but with restrictions on certain types of food. While it is obviously difficult for an ecological approach to account for such restrictions, I note the problem is equally thorny for classificationists. For they invariably consider the placement of tabooed species within an ethnotaxonomic classification scheme of the biological world. They fail to appreciate that it is not classes of animals or plants, but classes of food that are restricted.
- 4 I may note here that the neighboring and very closely related Kaingang Indians have a taboo on beef. Kaingang with whom I spoke told me that eating beef would make them sick. Of course, this taboo functions very nicely to signal their distinctiveness vis-à-vis the local Brazilian population, all of whom, to my knowledge, value beef most highly.
- 5 My data on age-grade food taboos are not fully adequate. For in my earlier analysis of Shokleng social categories (Urban 1978), I hypothesize that the *karũ* category consists really of two underlying categories. Unfortunately, my field notes do not go beyond the label *karũ*, with the consequence that I may not have understood to precisely whom the taboos in question apply. This aspect of my discussion may therefore stand in need of revision.
- 6 If we think of the marked term as correlating normally with the "semantically" most restricted entity, then we may construe this as a reversal of normal markedness relations.
- 7 The exception being only the three "class" system, that I have elsewhere hypothesized intersects with the moiety system (cf. Urban 1978). Because I unravelled this system only late in my field stay, it is once again possible that I failed to understand the precise nature of certain taboos, namely, of those I label subsequently "1". It is possible that these, or some of them, may have both moiety and class restrictions.
- 8 We are probably dealing here with proportionality within an ethnotaxonomic system of some sort. I say this because of the Kaingang restriction on beef (cf. f.n. 4). It was evident to me that Kaingang made a primary distinction between game or aboriginal animals, on the one hand, and domesticated or European-imported animals, on the other. Thus, the restriction on cattle makes sense in terms of the proportionality argument given here, only if we accept this as a primary distinction. From our scientific biological perspective, of course, cattle are simply "mammals".

- 9 It will be evident that I have already snuck certain linguistic factors into my analysis of Level-II, especially where I extend the hypothesis to include such linguistic labelling of moieties as "up" vs. "down", and so forth.
- 10 It is such ethnoconceptions that Ross (1978:5) terms "native rationales" for the taboo, indicating thereby his belief that the ethnoconceptions play no role in determining which species are tabooed.
- 11 Of the large rodents, only the capibara seems--according to my data. anyway--to be missing here. This may have to do with the special beliefs surrounding this creature, which is thought to have been, in reasonably recent times, a human being.
- 12 Of course, if we think of the whole social organization as ecologically adapted, then in an indirect way the semiotic code I have discussed also functions ecologically. But this indirect ecological functioning is quite different from the immediate ecological consequences of food tabooing discussed by Ross (1978) and others.

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