

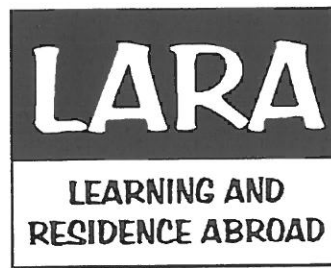
# **UNIT SIXTEEN**

## **Belief and Action 1 Categorisation and Rituals**

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# CONTENTS

## Page No.

### **Section 1**

<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2. Links with other units</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>3. Background notes</b>	<b>3</b>

### **Section 2**

<b>1. Outline of a session</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>2. Description of a session</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>3. Advice and comments</b>	<b>16</b>

### **Section 3**

<b>1. Assignment</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>2. Handouts</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>3. Readings</b>	<b>25</b>

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# SECTION ONE

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# 1. Introduction

## KINDNESS TO ANIMALS

If I went vegetarian  
And didn't eat lambs for dinner,  
I think I'd be a better person  
And also thinner.

But the lamb is not endangered  
And at least I can truthfully say  
I have never, ever, eaten a barn owl,  
So perhaps I am OK.

Wendy Cope (1992) *Serious Concerns*.  
London: Faber and Faber:19

This is the first of two sessions encouraging students to engage in a more in-depth approach to the anthropological material on the value systems, ideologies and categories which structure and give meaning to everyday action. The unit has been placed near the end of the course because it is perhaps more demanding in terms both of anthropological ideas, and of the experience of data collection and analysis that it provides.

The principal aim is for students to reflect upon the relationship between social behaviour and the symbolic patterns and meaning systems that inform it in particular cultural practices, but which are not immediately obvious. In other words, to look for the significance to be found in material and social life beyond its surface realisation, and to see that the apparently functional reasons for everyday behaviour are also open to cultural interpretation. Two very accessible ways of approaching this complex area are to be found in an examination of perceptions and presentations of the human body and in the practices, rituals and discourses surrounding food. Examining these aspects of the students' own cultural environment helps them to interrogate their common sense notions about what is 'normal' or 'natural', and think about how we are socialised into them. These shared customs are examined as surface manifestations of wider themes and assumptions, and as ways in which we act out our social identity and maintain our social group.

## 2. Links with other units

There are numerous links with other units. For example, the early unit on Social Space (Unit 3) revealed how our perceptions and use of space go beyond the purely functional and require interpretation to do with symbolic classifications. Concepts of 'inside' and 'outside', 'nature' and 'culture' introduced there belong to the binary patterning of categories discussed in this unit. Both units investigate the boundaries, both spatial and conceptual, that we create and maintain in order to keep such categories separate. The ways in which ritual comes into play at boundary crossings

are also examined. Finally, the reading 'Supermarket Semiology' in this Unit, which attempts to explain the reasons for the distribution and placing of certain objects within the space of the supermarket is a particularly clear link with the idea of the symbolic use of space.

There is a strong connection with the unit on Family (Unit 5) in as much as our culturally determined understanding of what family means involves a classification system of kinship ties and roles. This is a shared 'code' for slotting family members into given positions with associated rights and responsibilities. Also, family mealtimes were studied in Unit 5 as a ritual that serves an important socialising function.

A link can also be established with non-verbal communication and the use and interpretation of the body as a carrier of messages (see Unit 3). The idea of gift-giving introduced in Local Level Politics (Unit 15) is connected with the material in this unit too. Unit 15 showed how gifts are symbolic expressions of social relationships, and how gift giving is underpinned by a complex classification system depending on tacit insider knowledge about hierarchies, boundaries and ritual.

In addition, there are reminders of methodological issues which are a constant throughout the units. The assignment gives students experience in eliciting data on belief systems, relating this data to broader anthropological concepts and representing it visually (i.e. in the form of a table, chart or taxonomy). Finally, the study of eating habits conducted by Mary Douglas and Michael Nicod allows students to reflect once again on the role of the researcher in the field, and on ways of presenting raw data in forms that are clear, accessible and useful.

### **3. Background notes**

#### **Symbolic classification and boundaries**

This unit draws on a symbolic and semiotic view of culture. In other words, culture is seen as 'socially established structures of meaning' (Geertz, 1973), and the elements that form these structures or patterns can systematically be located and interpreted.

Even the most cursory look at the surface manifestations of social behaviour in a given social environment will yield an abundance of information about phenomena such as the way people present their bodies, how they decorate their homes, what they eat, etc. Such phenomena are readily explained by insiders according to notions of what is 'common sense', 'natural' or 'normal', whereas to outsiders they may be anything but normal and may be some of the most palpable markers of cultural difference. Once again, the contrast between what is natural or simply functional and what is socially and culturally constructed is stressed.

To go beyond a simple observation of difference and the 'normal' into the realm of cultural interpretation involves looking for the structured and the symbolic in everyday activities and talk, and attempting to account for these phenomena by teasing out the meanings that underpin them. As the title of this unit suggests by its combination of the terms 'belief' and 'action', there is a symbiosis between action

(including talk) and culturally determined systems of belief. Such systems underpin and help to explain our actions, and our actions and talk in turn construct and maintain the systems. In other words, as anthropologist Joy Hendry points out, 'Symbolism pervades human behaviour, at even the most mundane levels, and the ability to use symbols, including speech, is one of the ways in which the behaviour of humans is said to be distinguished from the behaviour of other animals.' She goes on to suggest that 'it would not be going too far to describe the whole concept of society as a set of shared symbols' (Hendry 1999: p.82).

Human beings also have pattern-making and system-building tendencies: we make sense of the chaos of the surrounding world and the mass of impressions we receive by placing interpretative 'grids' upon it, by classifying, naming and labelling experience. We make patterns out of our symbols. In other words, meaning exists in symbolic classification systems, and it is the job of the anthropologist to 'decode' these, identifying their structure and components in order to make some sense of human behaviour.

A particularly clear way of explaining the phenomenon of system building is to imagine that we all have filing cabinets in our heads. These are gradually constructed through the long process of socialisation and every element of perceived reality relates to this internalised system of classification by which we file things. Some aspects of our filing system may include private variants that are particular to ourselves. The overall system, however, is public: it constitutes shared cultural knowledge and is a product of the cultural groups to which we belong (Geertz 1973). A different group may file a particular element under a different heading ('snake', for example, may be classified as 'inedible' by one cultural group, and 'edible' by another).

A good example of this symbolic patterning of behaviour is to be found in eating habits. Some of what we like and don't like is certainly a product of personal taste. Personal taste, however, is only exercised within a restricted set of possibilities dictated by the patterning of the 'eating community' to which we belong. The fact that I cannot bear eating cheese may be explained by personal taste. The fact that I cannot bear the idea of eating monkey brain or that I associate dogs with companionship rather than with calories is more anthropologically interesting since I have never tried them and do not know whether they are to my taste or not. This second example takes us into the realm of public symbols, and of a shared system of beliefs about what is edible and inedible. Pre-socialised beings (i.e. very young children) are frequently to be found eating the inedible (mud, sand, worms, faeces) until the filing systems are in place. Eating, then, involves a highly structured system of meanings which it makes visible. It is therefore a fertile area for revealing the presence of taxonomies, stereotypes, schemas and 'scripts' (our pre-written, internalised set of instructions for what to eat, how to structure and organise a wide variety of 'eating events' and what behaviour is appropriate for them).

One of the most immediately obvious patterns in terms of food communities involves the basic binary distinction we have just mentioned between edible and inedible. Leach (1966) suggests that our classification systems tend to be structured around such binary oppositions. Categories such as us/them; male/female; nature/culture; order/disorder; animal/human; good/bad; clean/dirty; left/right; out/in;

powerful/powerless; black/white; normal/abnormal; pure/impure, etc. are observable both in physical actions and in social practices, including discourse, which must also be seen as a kind of behaviour. Simple examples of binary oppositions in discourse are the typical statements made about fashion (something being either 'out' or 'in'), the grading system that relies on a spatial metaphor ('high' = good, 'low' = bad), or perhaps the idea of nurses or midwives reassuring patients that their experience is 'perfectly normal'.

Lincoln (1986) and others have argued that society is constructed out of another fundamental binary opposition: that between feelings of affinity (belonging, identity, solidarity) and estrangement (difference, otherness, alienation, distance). In other words, the patterned eating habits we create, share and maintain through practice and discourse are part of the way in which we act out our identity, confirm our belonging to a particular group, and the difference of this group from others. This leads to symbolic differentiation and to the construction of boundaries.

### **Symbolic pollution: purity and danger**

Mary Douglas (1966) suggests that a concern with boundaries between such symbolically understood categories is common to all humanity. She has analysed the operation of these categories in terms of 'purity and danger', or the symbolic pollution we experience when the set of ordered relations through which we make sense of our world is placed under threat by our having to take account of inappropriate or uncomfortable elements. These are pushed to the margins or treated as 'dirty' or 'polluting' so as not to disturb established assumptions. According to Douglas, there is really no such thing as 'dirt'. 'Dirt' is a relative concept that does not always refer to literal soiling or germs, but rather to the threat of disorder. What we refer to as 'dirt' or 'dirty' is simply 'matter out of place': something that contravenes our sense of the ordered relations of things. 'Where there is dirt', she claims, 'there is a system'. An obvious manifestation of this phenomenon is located in racist discourse that typically incorporates notions of pollution. To quote Douglas, 'Dirt has nothing to do with hygienic or material conditions. Rather, something is dirty or polluting because it is inconsistent with a governing symbolic classification.' The notion of pollution, then, creates and sustains the dominant symbolic order.

We have seen one example of this 'pollution' used in racist discourse in the unit on National Identities and Local Boundaries (Unit 13). Another good example of symbolic pollution is this description of an aspect of the classification system of English Gypsies (Sutherland, 1978):

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The Gypsies in England [...] put great emphasis on the distinction between the inside and outside of the body. The inside symbolises the private 'Gypsy' self and is pure in contrast to the outside which symbolises the impure, public body – the part of the body that has defiling contact with non-Gypsy society. Consistent with this notion of the body is their emphasis on the purity of food, which enters the body. It follows that the washing of items that come



into contact with food, such as dishes and tea towels, must be kept separate from items that touch the outside of the body, such as clothes. English Gypsies often judge one another's worth according to how strictly 'clean they are about their tea towels'. One visible way of estimating this is by observing the washing hanging on the line; tea towels are always separated from other clothes.

This is a good instance of how a very specific, symbolic belief about 'cleanliness' is manifested in action. It also highlights the presence of a shared classification system operating along the binary oppositions inside/outside, pure/impure and Gypsy/non-Gypsy.

### **Liminality: taboo, ritual and power**

As we have seen, symbolic pollution is most likely to occur when clearly defined structures are threatened by ambiguity and disorder. According to Leach, in order to control our classification systems, we in the West make binary distinctions, then mediate the distinction by creating an ambiguous, taboo-laden intermediate category (Leach 1966). This resides in the boundary or the 'limen' and leads to the formation of, for example, liminal groups (e.g. the homeless), liminal phases (e.g. rites of passage from childhood to adulthood) or even liminal moments (e.g. when meeting people, as discussed in Unit 3). 'Taboo' applies to categories that are disordering and anomalous with respect to clear-cut binary oppositions. It is in ambiguities that danger lies, and along with it power (the power to disturb and disrupt). This is why liminal situations, marginal people or individuals in a marginal state between two clearly defined and acceptable categories require careful handling.

As Douglas suggests, there is energy in the 'margins and unstructured areas' of society. Marginal people or 'outsiders' with undefined status are therefore both fascinating and dangerous. Extreme examples of such individuals are the witches, werewolves and vampires of legend who cross the nature/culture threshold and are seen to consort with the animal world. Other more everyday marginals who are still treated with suspicion and perceived as 'antisocial' might include travellers, dropouts, the tramps studied by Spradley (1970), the long-distance truck drivers studied by Agar (1986), bisexuals or transsexuals. These individuals are often invested with power since they are potentially destructive of established systems and patterns (e.g. the Lone Ranger/the good Samaritan). Liminality can also involve incitement to action and social change (e.g. punks or millennialist or fundamentalist groups).

A good illustration of some of the above points is to be found in Bruce Lincoln's description of revolutionary exhumations during the Spanish Civil War as an attempt on the part of the powerless to appropriate power (Lincoln, 1989). These he describes as 'a ritual in which the traditionally subordinate segment of Spanish society sought by means of a highly charged discourse of gestures and deeds to deconstruct the old social order and construct a new, different order in its place'. The Republicans, in an attempt to reveal the prevailing system of power relations as rotten and the Right as corrupt, attacked the Church to reveal how the pretensions that had traditionally buttressed its power were bankrupt. According to the doctrine

of the Catholic Church, the symbolic or intermediary figures who represent it such as priests and nuns do not rot after death but stay pure. The Republicans dug them up to show that this idea of sanctity was bogus and that they had rotted. By dragging their corpses into public view and piling them up on street corners the Left showed their derision for the symbolic corruption and moral decay of the Church representatives and of the Church as an institution. This is a good example of symbol and action in symbiosis.

Liminality and ambiguity in all sorts of more familiar social situations are handled by ritual to ensure safe passage over the boundary between one state and the next. Ritual is thus something concrete that can help us to understand symbolic systems of classification. Rituals include forms of social behaviour such as cleansing, baptism, marriage ceremonies, or expulsion. They may serve to manage rites of passage between one state and another; they may also be observed in everyday behaviour such as politeness where the same distinction between solidarity and difference appears a universal phenomenon (Brown and Levinson: 1987). In Unit 15 on Local Level Politics, students read Bailey's account of the housewives in Valloire (1971). Their ritual donning of an apron before they left the house to go shopping is a public and commonly understood symbol allowing them to go about their business quickly and without stopping to chat to neighbours. Bailey explains how this marker of a 'busy' role is one surface manifestation of a much wider system of beliefs about gender, and about women's propensity to 'gossip'. The apron allows the women to escape this stigma without running a second risk of appearing haughty or rude, but the gendered nature of the practice remains.

In physical terms, when we cross literal boundaries or thresholds between one area of social space and another, this crossing is usually accompanied by ritual (behavioural, linguistic or both). For instance, when people in Malta move from a secular to a religious space, this is marked by women covering their heads, and men uncovering theirs. Conversely, the female factory workers studied by Westwood and Blachu (1988) made a conscious decision not to demarcate the transition between home and work by wearing slippers in the factory.

To conclude, ritual is a way of organising and containing hierarchical differences by negotiating safe passage between two clear-cut categories or states. Interpreting ritual can reveal a great deal about the prevailing system of classification in a social group and the conflicts within that system. It has a high concentration of symbolic meaning and important emotional and moral aspects. The behaviour, dress, discourse and objects used in rituals are tangible manifestations of ideology which is continually being re-made in everyday life.

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### **Individual and social bodies**

It is interesting that the expression 'making a statement' in terms of dress-code is used only pejoratively, and only to designate a radically non-conformist stance, where the individual concerned is organising their physical appearance in order to stress dissociation from a group. Otherwise, it is assumed no 'statement' is being made. This, however, is not the case: we are all of us walking sets of symbols and our perceptions of the body as well as our bodily practices are a good way in to understanding symbolic classification systems.



The human body yields an enormous amount of cultural information. Bodies are universal elements in any society, but the ways in which people adorn them, conceive of them and use them to convey messages to each other varies considerably. Bodies offer a series of symbolic reflections of the way people order their world, and they must be interpreted according to cultural context. As in the case of food tastes, the way in which the human body is presented cannot be interpreted as a mere expression of individual preference or personality, even in the individualistic societies of the Western world. This presentation is inevitably underpinned by complex, shared systems of belief about what it means to be human, what it means to belong to a particular social group, what it means to be masculine or feminine and so forth. In other words, as Douglas points out, 'the human body is always treated as an image of society'.

For example, examining the body can tell us a great deal about shared perceptions of what is 'healthy', 'erotic' or 'beautiful' in a given society, be it the waif-like models of many of our catwalks, or the foot-binding common amongst aristocratic Chinese women. The body is also an expression of social boundaries and order. There are variable rules about factors such as the extent to which the body is covered or exposed in public, and about appropriate types of dress and hairstyles for men and women. Hair and hair styles are particularly laden with symbolic meaning to do not only with the idea of beauty, but also of unrestrained sexuality on the one hand, and on the other discipline and control. Extreme reactions to women's underarm hair, or Mrs Thatcher's determination to prevent any member of her cabinet from growing a beard are both examples supporting the values attached to hair growth.

Conventions of dress also vary according to age, class, social status, and the desire to denote affiliation to a particular group, from the pearls and Hermes scarves associated with French bourgeois women (de Wita, 1988) to the safety-pins and pink hair of the Punks. Similarly, the Rolex watch, the Calvin Klein T-shirt or the Nike trainers are statements. More formalised signs of belonging might be the school tie or uniform, and some signs are permanent. As Hendry (1999: p.86) points out:

In Japan [...] some gangsters wear beautiful tatoos which cover a large part of their bodies, and depict scenes from the country's abundant religious and mythological artistic repertoire, but they keep them hidden under their clothes most of the time because the wider society finds them offensive and disgusting. To have one done – a painful process of more than a year – therefore symbolizes an irreversible commitment to the life of the underworld, and even only part of them, revealed at a strategic moment, makes a powerful statement about such an allegiance.

The most fundamental binary opposition at work in perceptions of the body is that between nature and culture, the uncivilised animal world or the civilised society of human beings. To describe somebody as an 'animal' is an insult, and in popular discourse the idea of disorder is often expressed by the word 'pigsty.' On a physical level, one could cite the Balinese habit of filing their teeth flat in order to make an emphatic distinction between themselves and the animal world, associated with

fangs. Stressing their humanity in this way is a means of ensuring reincarnation. Closer to home, on the other hand, the body-piercing trend that has become so popular amongst young people over the last decade could perhaps be said to evoke unease in part because of its reminder of the animal world (bulls and pigs also have rings through their noses).

Another symbolic 'binary' pair is to be found in the distinction between right- and left-handedness. This is laden with meaning in many cultures, and traditionally denotes other categories such as sacred and profane, pure and impure, good and evil, male and female, etc. There is often a general proscription against left-handedness, which is translated into discourse by words such as 'gauche'.

The idea of liminal categories can also be seen in operation where the body is concerned. Bodily emissions (e.g. menstrual blood, urine, faeces, etc.) fit into this category and require special treatment or ritual to make them 'safe'. 'The emissions of the body in particular – blood, urine, faeces, menstrual blood, semen, vomit, saliva, sweat, etc. – are all by-products that may be considered purifying or polluting, natural or unnatural, powerfully good or powerfully evil' (Sutherland, 1978). Gypsies distinguish between emissions from the top half of the body (clean and curative) and the bottom half (polluting). Special treatment is always needed for the latter. Originating in the self, they are to be distinguished from it once they have been excreted, and are the prototype of 'dirt'.

Changes in status are often also marked by bodily changes. For example, body decoration is a way of identifying age-set status for the Kayapo, whilst head shaving often accompanies the entry to a religious order or is a mark of respect and shows a change of status by family members at a funeral, and circumcision marks the passage from boyhood to adulthood. Finally, facial expressions, postures and gestures are also examples of the symbolic use of the body (e.g. the way we stand up as a mark of respect, or the Japanese practice of low bowing). There is a vast literature on cross-cultural comparisons of the way people set space between themselves (proxemics) and of bodily and facial movement (kinesics). See Unit 3: Non-verbal Communication and Social Space.

### **Food, eating and symbolic classification**

As already suggested, one very accessible way of approaching the issue of symbolic classification systems is to focus on the ritual and meanings surrounding food. Food is experienced as an immediate and palpable marker of cultural difference, so we can speak of 'eating communities', and regard food as an important expression of our cultural identity. It is a social marker of national, regional, ethnic and social difference, class, age, religion, etc. Everyone thinks of food and eating habits when they think of culture, but they tend to do so in a superficial way which does not consider the contested nature of food and eating, subculturally, and which does not go beyond description to explore symbolic interpretations. Food is too readily used as a convenient vehicle for expressing a 'gut' reaction to otherness – not just to the foodstuff per se, but by extension to the people who eat it. A whole nation can thus be stereotypically designated by a foodstuff (e.g. 'frogs' or 'rosbifs').

Classification systems are particularly in evidence in the practices and discourses around meat. As Levi-Strauss (1962) points out, animals are not only good to eat, but 'good to think'. Meat eating provides the most contested area both between cultures, and within them (e.g. vegetarianism or veganism). With reference to mainstream American society, Sahlins discusses this both in terms of what types of animals people feel comfortable classifying as 'meat', and what cuts of animals are most highly valued as foodstuff (see Section 3). His analysis of the public outrage during the 1973 price rises at the government's suggestion that people should eat horsemeat is revealing about such shared assumptions. The public perception of horses is that, unlike cattle, they are used to being petted, and are therefore closer to humans – part of the family, rather like dogs. The public's being urged to eat horses, as well as cheaper cuts of meat such as heart and kidney, 'made Marie Antoinette look like a model of compassion'. Sahlins' conclusion about the hierarchy of edibility of the various parts of an animal is that demand is organised by symbolic logic (e.g. there is more steak on an animal than there is liver or tongue, yet in most Western societies steak is more expensive). This cannot be accounted for by the respective nutritional values of liver or steak either. He accounts for it by suggesting that in this eating community, 'Edibility is inversely related to humanity'. He sees the binary distinction between 'inner' and 'outer' at work here, and suggests that the 'innards' remind us uncomfortably of our 'innermost selves', so that eating them takes us one symbolic step further towards cannibalism. He also examines the euphemistic terms for cuts such as 'meat', 'roast', 'chop', which are more acceptable than 'heart', etc. In turn, he says, this 'totemic order' tells us something about the status of people. Finally, it also tells us something about the webs of power in which people are enmeshed (how, for example, has the positive perception of steak come to be the dominant one?)

In 'Taking the Biscuit: The Structure of British Meals', Mary Douglas gives a structural analysis of the eating habits of four working class families, examining not only what is eaten, but when, how, in what sequence, and with what degree of ceremony. She also focuses on how the order and structure of meals is used to punctuate the day, the week and the year.

The article traces the way in which, throughout the day, the food moves from essentially liquid, or liquid-covered (the gravy and custard of the midday meal) to the dry and geometric shapes of the sweet biscuits eaten before bedtime. As Douglas puts it, 'One of the structuring rules of this food system is progressive desiccation and geometrification of forms throughout the day. The first course of the main meal is presented in what appears to the uninitiated as a slushy, indistinguishable mixture, in which it is difficult to distinguish trimmings and solid dressings from the meat and potatoes under their lavish coat of rich brown gravy. The second course, though still wet and viscous, has an undeniable sculptural form, whether it be the sphere of the christmas pudding, or the trifle decorated with fruit.' Her conclusion is that this dietary system reveals 'the mimetic and rhythmic qualities of other symbolic systems. The capacity to recall the whole by the structure of the parts is a basic technique in music and poetry for arousing attention and sustaining interest.'

In another study of eating habits, this time of children in the North East of England, Allison James analyses the symbolism of their separate, non-adult eating community as a manifestation of the 'conceptual gulf' that separates their world from the world of



grown-ups (James 1979). She focuses in particular on the ways in which children contravene adult food classifications, as well as adult notions of purity and hygiene, by eating the cheap, 'rubbishy' sweets they call 'kets'. The words 'ket' and 'ketty' have negative connotations for adults (meaning 'cheap rubbish') and positive ones in the children's world. As James explains, kets may be seen as constituting a category of food in themselves: 'If sweets belong to the adult world, the human cultural world of cooked foods as opposed to the natural, raw food of the animal kingdom, then 'kets' belong in a third category. Neither raw nor cooked, according to the adult perspective, 'kets' are a kind of rotten food.'

The rules surrounding kets and the eating of kets reveal how 'children construct their own ordered system of rules by reinterpreting the social models given to them by adults.' This reinterpretation involves disorder and subversion. For example, the names given to kets emphasise inedibility (James cites 'Syco discs', 'Fizzy Bullets', 'Jelly Wellies', etc.). They also contravene the taboos surrounding animals and cannibalism (e.g. 'Jelly Babies', 'Snakes', 'Dormice'), and the bright colours of kets are not colours normally associated with the edible. In addition, the sensations they procure (such as fizzing on the tongue) are not associated with 'ordinary' eating.

Unlike sweets such as toffee or fudge, kets are 'impossible to reproduce in the kitchen' and are therefore completely removed from the domestically prepared food children are required to eat at meal times. Meals, in fact, are an adult conception, and shared eating events in the family are prime times for socialisation, correction and training of the child as he or she is absorbed into the adult social body (as we saw in Unit 5 on families). The injunction 'Don't eat between meals!' relies on the adult conception of meals as the main category of eating events, whereas James points out that for children, meals get in the way of ket eating, a type of eating over which they have control.

Nor do adult rules of hygiene apply where kets are concerned. Children rummage around with grubby hands in boxes of unwrapped kets on the sweet shop counter. They pass sweets from mouth to mouth, compare half-sucked gob stoppers, keep half-eaten kets in their pocket for later, and play with the literally inedible chewing and bubble gum in a way that breaks all adult taboos about using utensils rather than fingers to put food in the mouth, and not removing it once it has been put there.

James's conclusion is that ket eating is in fact a 'non-conformist' part of the socialisation process whereby the child, through contradiction of the adult categories 'edible' and 'inedible', operates a conceptual separation between self and other. It is therefore important that the symbolic order underpinning it represents 'a metaphoric chewing up of adult order.'

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A final illustration of symbolic classification systems shows how they are at work in the layout of supermarkets and chain stores. Brian Taylor (see Section 3) studies the systematic positioning of supermarket items to show how it is dictated by (and in turn serves to maintain) shared ideas about a 'natural' order. This demands, for example, that we do not find tinned fruit next to shoe polish, spaghetti next to soap powder or clothing next to wallpaper. This is a good example of how interrogating the everyday can be revealing: to give purely functional accounts (e.g. confectionery is placed near the till in order to tempt children) is not enough to explain the complex

ordering of things. Deeply held ideas about taboo and proximity, or about body-boundary violations are also at work. Taylor suggests that boundary-violating elements (e.g. cigarettes) are located on the outer margins of the system as near as possible to the door.

A final point: in creating taxonomies of e.g. foodstuffs, it becomes clear that, as Lincoln suggests, a taxonomy 'is not only an epistemological instrument (a means for organising information) but it is also (as it comes to organise the organisers) an instrument for the construction of society.'

## **Student projects**

Because our student ethnographers are all involved in uncovering the symbolic meanings that help to account for social behaviour, the ideas covered in this unit are very widely used. This may not be in studies that are dedicated to an analysis of the human body or eating habits, but an eating event or examination of the importance of dress may well form part of a study. For instance, a project on Catholicism and the link in a Spanish family between eating practices and religious belief drew on this unit, as did a study of transvestite prostitutes in Cadiz. Here the messages transmitted by the clothes worn or by the way the body and face are adorned were very transparently and consciously being used by informants.

One example that does rely quite heavily on the idea of food as a marker of difference is a project that explored the way local and foreign students used the kitchen in a student hostel. This was written about not in terms of stereotyped differences but as part of a wider set of concepts to do with pollution and otherness, the related discourses of family and familial relations, and their connections with ideas of nation and foreigner.

One of the most important effects of this unit lies in the area of methodology and the presentation of results. Thinking in terms of classification systems gives students a way in to understanding taxonomies, which can help them to make sense of their data as they collect it, as well as helping them to present it in a meaningful way in the final written piece.

We should point out before moving on to the next section that the basic concepts in this unit are derived from anthropology written in the '60s and '70s. In the last decade, post-modernism has put into question notions of fixed categories, grand narratives, and the ideas of cultural and sub-cultural groups. The 'new ethnicities' studies (Hall, Gilroy) have challenged notions of essential groupings with shared characteristics and studies of the new technologies and techno-popular culture have proposed new alignments and groupings. Language students may have been affected by post-modernism in their literary/cultural studies courses, and may bring these new understandings to their ethnographic work. Given the brevity of the students' contact with ethnography, however, in this short course we have opted to work through more traditional approaches since they are probably easier for the majority of undergraduate students to grasp.

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## **SECTION TWO**

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# 1. Outline of a session

1. Introduction
2. Assignment feedback
3. Discussion of handout (extracts from Sahlins' 'Food as Symbolic Code')
4. Discussion of Mary Douglas article, 'Taking the Biscuit: The Structure of British Meals'
5. Discussion of 'Supermarket Semiology'
6. Summing up, and how concepts have been used in former student ethnographic projects.

## 2. Description of a session

### 2.1 Introduction

Draw on the background notes to introduce the idea of symbolic classification and the shared systems of belief that underpin aspects of social behaviour. Begin by making a distinction between the functional explanation for, for example, what we eat and how we dress, and the symbolic and patterned in our behaviour. Remind students of the introduction to some of these issues in Unit 4.

The ideas are best illustrated through simple, everyday examples of social practice. For example, as part of a process of socialisation children are often told 'Don't put your feet on the table'. This appears to us to have an immediate and obvious social goal to do with norms of 'politeness' and 'appropriate' standards of behaviour. However, whilst in a restaurant we do not expect a waiter to put his fingers in our soup (we may refuse to eat it if he does because of 'germs'), if the same thing happens at home we say 'excuse fingers' and it is no longer considered to be 'dirty'. It is worth asking students how they would attempt to account for such rules to an outsider with very different cultural norms to their own. This is not as easy to do as it may sound; unpacking the notion of 'appropriateness' will reveal shared ideas about mealtime rituals, food, the body, boundaries, hygiene and pollution.

Other examples from the background notes should be drawn upon to illustrate the related key concepts of boundaries, binary distinctions, symbolic pollution, liminality, taboo, ritual and power. This may sound like a daunting list for a brief introductory session, but if the sequence of ideas is presented in the same order as in the background notes, a logic emerges. The important thing is to ensure students begin to look beyond functional explanations and see not the 'natural' but the 'cultural' in what they do.

If time is available, the introductory session can be expanded and made more interactive by drawing more heavily on the chapter 'The Human Frame' (see 3.2) and asking students to prepare it prior to the session. They can very usefully be asked to focus on their own physical presentation (dress, hairstyle, make up, jewellery, etc.) as a conveyor of messages.

It is useful to end this opening section with an OHT of key terms and concepts, or to write these down on the projector as you go along.

## **2.2 Assignment feedback**

For the pre-session assignment, students are asked to interview family or friends about the kinds of food they would and would not eat, and their reasons. This allows them to put their data collection skills into practice and to use their own findings as basic material for the session (see the assignment in Section 3).

Students should work in small groups to prepare the feedback. Remind them that the idea is to get closer to the structure and the components of the symbolic systems that underpin a variety of eating habits. Give them about 20 minutes to discuss their data and to see if any patterns emerge. By the end of the 20 minutes they should have made an attempt to illustrate these patterns, structural relations or 'classification systems' in diagram form on an OHP transparency (see examples in Section 3 which also include a 'scatter sheet' one student compiled to help her consider a number of issues related to food and eating).

Each group then presents their chart/diagram to the class for discussion. It is important to point out that there is no 'right' or 'wrong' way of doing this; groups should simply think about representing and explaining the data in a way that makes sense to them. Assignment feedback has typically involved students making a distinction between animals that are wild, animals that are edible, and animals that are pets (i.e. anything you see in a safari park or in your living room is not edible). They should be pushed to account for such distinctions (questions such as 'Is rabbit food or pet?' or 'Why are chickens not pets?' can be useful here).

Try to get them to account for the strong feelings of disgust/pleasure evoked by certain foodstuffs. Again, the aim is to reveal that much of this is not 'natural' but socially created. Introduce the idea of 'eating communities' and of food and eating as important expressions of cultural identity. Remind them of the importance of looking at the discourses surrounding food. These include not only the language used by their informants to express their reactions, but also issues such as how we 'distance' the idea of the animal in order to think of it as 'meat'. For example, there is a conceptual leap between the anthropomorphic language used to talk about pets and to draw them into our own world, and the euphemistic language used to distance edible animals from us (e.g. in Britain we do not eat 'pig' or 'sheep', but 'pork' and 'mutton').

Finally, it may be useful to remind students why we wanted them to produce a chart or diagram. Introduce the idea of taxonomies, and point out that not only is it useful to present material in this way in a project, but that to do so can also reveal information to the researcher during the process of data collection and analysis.

## **2.3 Extracts from Sahlins' 'Food as Symbolic Code' (See Section 3)**

Relate the discussion to the extract from Sahlins on the student handout (this can be read in 5 minutes or so or during a break). Sahlins explores the ideas of taboo within

meat-eating communities, notably reactions in the USA in the 1970s to government suggestions that people could economise by eating cheaper parts of the animal (such as heart or liver) or by eating horsemeat. Sahlins' interpretations can be used to help students sharpen their own analysis and take it a step further. Questioning them about the extract should encourage them to articulate their understanding of binary distinctions, taboos and the symbolic as expressed through attitudes to meat and associated discourses.

The final point made by Sahlins concerns issues of status, class and power, such that the whole social system can be seen to be reflected through food.

## **2.4 Discussion of Mary Douglas article, 'Taking the Biscuit: The Structure of British Meals'**

This is quite a difficult account of the structure of British meals in four working-class families in the early 1970s. Douglas suggests an intricate structuring to their food system, moving through lunch to the early evening meal and finally a late-night minor meal of a hot drink and biscuits. As the day progresses, one of the obvious changes is from wet to dry food, from gravy and custard to the dry, sweet biscuit (see background notes).

This article can be introduced by linking it to the assignment on which students have just been working: both are concerned with finding the strange and the structured in what appears routine and familiar, and both raise issues of description and interpretation (see Unit 4 on Shared Cultural Knowledge, again).

Points to raise with students include the ways in which food creates, expresses and maintains order through ritual (its 'capacity to mark social relations and to celebrate big and small occasions'). Also raise methodological issues (the way data is collected, the way evidence is presented, and the structuring principle that emerges. This might include Douglas's divisions into binaries (savory/sweet; hot/cold; liquid/dry); the terminology she devises to designate eating practices ('food event'; 'structured event', etc.). Also for discussion here, include the researcher's decision not to ask direct questions about the food he was served, since the families whose eating habits he was studying began to change their patterns of behaviour and to make efforts to feed him in a certain way. This meant that the data collected began to be affected by his presence at the family meal table, and this aspect of his research can usefully be linked to the idea of reflexivity introduced in Unit 2: *What is an Ethnographic Approach?*

Finally, students may be asked to consider the patterning of their own 'eating events' throughout the day/week, considering reasons for the various degrees of 'complexity, copiousness and ceremoniousness' of meals. Simple questions to unpack shared perceptions such as 'what is a snack?' or 'what is a 'proper meal'?' can produce interesting results, as can a consideration of the rules for the permitted combinations and sequences of food. If there is time, bring in the example of 'kets' here as described in the Background Notes.

## **2.5 Discussion of reading 'Supermarket Semiology'.**

The discussion of this need only be brief, but it presents a further useful example of the ways in which notions of symbolic classification systems can be studied. Describe briefly the study carried out and the findings (see background notes). Give students the handout with the diagram. Once again, the emphasis here is not just on the findings but on the ways in which they can usefully be presented within an ethnographic text.

## **2.6 Summing up, and how concepts have been used in former student ethnographic projects.**

See the background notes for ways in which students have drawn on the concepts for project work.

As a lot of new concepts have been introduced, it may be useful to end the session by showing an OHT summing up the main points:

- ◆ Perceptions of the body and bodily practices are a good way in to understanding symbolic classification systems
- ◆ The rituals and discourses around food are culturally determined
- ◆ There are ways of analysing and making sense of them by looking, for example, at structural relations or at meal-time behaviour
- ◆ Cultural and social groups can be constructed and maintained, in part, by a shared food culture (the idea of 'eating communities')
- ◆ Food rituals and practices can create order, and also boundaries
- ◆ The whole area of food can be a good way in to a culture when students find themselves in a different cultural environment.

## **3. Advice and comments**

Unpacking and challenging students to account for patterns of behaviour which are so 'close to home' and so potentially emotive can result in a very lively session. The student assignment feedback is, in general, extremely rich in terms of the examples students select for discussion and the diversity of views expressed. Plenty of time should be allowed for students to work on their findings and for class discussion. We stress this because the heuristic principle of the ethnography sessions means we have to be patient in urging students to go beyond the anecdotal rather than being analytical on their behalf. There is of course not time to follow up every line of enquiry, but several can be selected and the class can 'unpack' them thoroughly.

Time is also needed during the feedback as students should discuss not only the findings that emerge, but also how they have attempted to find meaningful ways of presenting this information in ways that make sense to the group. It is important to spend some time on this and to be explicit about the reasons for doing so (i.e. this is valuable experience in 'translating' meanings from lived experience into a textual account, and of working with the idea of schemata or taxonomies).

Discussion of the Douglas article should also be quite focused. Students tend to start with a critique of the findings, since it is true that Douglas's observations on the 'conservative' food habits of the British public in the early 1970s seem to fly in the face of the evidence of current eating patterns. The great cosmopolitanism of our mix of cuisines, and the different rhythms and practices of consumption (TV dinners, take aways, pre-prepared microwave meals for one, etc) make Douglas's pattern of the family meal of meat and two veg. seem rather archaic. This observation on social change is interesting, and students should be allowed to make it, but it should not dominate the discussion in an anecdotal way. What matters here is to show that, at whatever point in history and whatever place, we can find symbolic patterning. Students should therefore be encouraged to move quite rapidly beyond agreement or disagreement to a discussion of methodological issues such as how the research was conducted and how the results are presented.

### **Student Comments**

One aspect which seemed fairly important especially in connection with the consumption of meat was the process of 'derealisation' (sic) in order to take the food away from its origin and furthermore for convenience. The more animals are removed from their life spheres, the more acceptable it is to eat them. ...I found this session very interesting. I normally do not think why I eat something and why I don't. I normally try out a lot of dishes and I am every time amazed why people I know are so picky about what they eat. Furthermore, when it came later on to a discussion about stereotypes I thought about what we had said in the session about making things familiar by categorising and labelling them.



## **SECTION THREE**

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# 1. Assignment


## Eating Habits: Taste or Symbol?

1. Over the week try to engage as many of your friends/contacts/teachers/family members, etc. in an **ethnographic conversation** about their eating habits.
2. **Don't elicit information in an interview**, but try to work the conversation round to eating habits. Ideally, they should not feel they have been specifically questioned. But if you prefer to make your interest explicit, then mention that this is a subject you are looking at as part of your course. You may find talking about your own eating habits is a good way to get other people talking.
3. **Elicit as much as you can about:**
  - ◆ What animals they consider edible
  - ◆ What parts of animals they are happy to eat/would never eat (e.g. liver, lungs, tongue, etc.)
  - ◆ What meat they would consider eating if their normal food was not available (zebra, dog, sparrow, etc.)
  - ◆ What vegetables they would never eat
  - ◆ Their feelings if someone sitting next to them was eating a food they would never eat
  - ◆ Other interesting perceptions that emerge within all these questions. Elicit as much as you can about their **reasons** for eating/not eating certain foods.
4. Try to construct some '**value**' **patterns or classifications** from the data you have collected. You will be asked to draw up a chart or a diagram with other students in the class session.

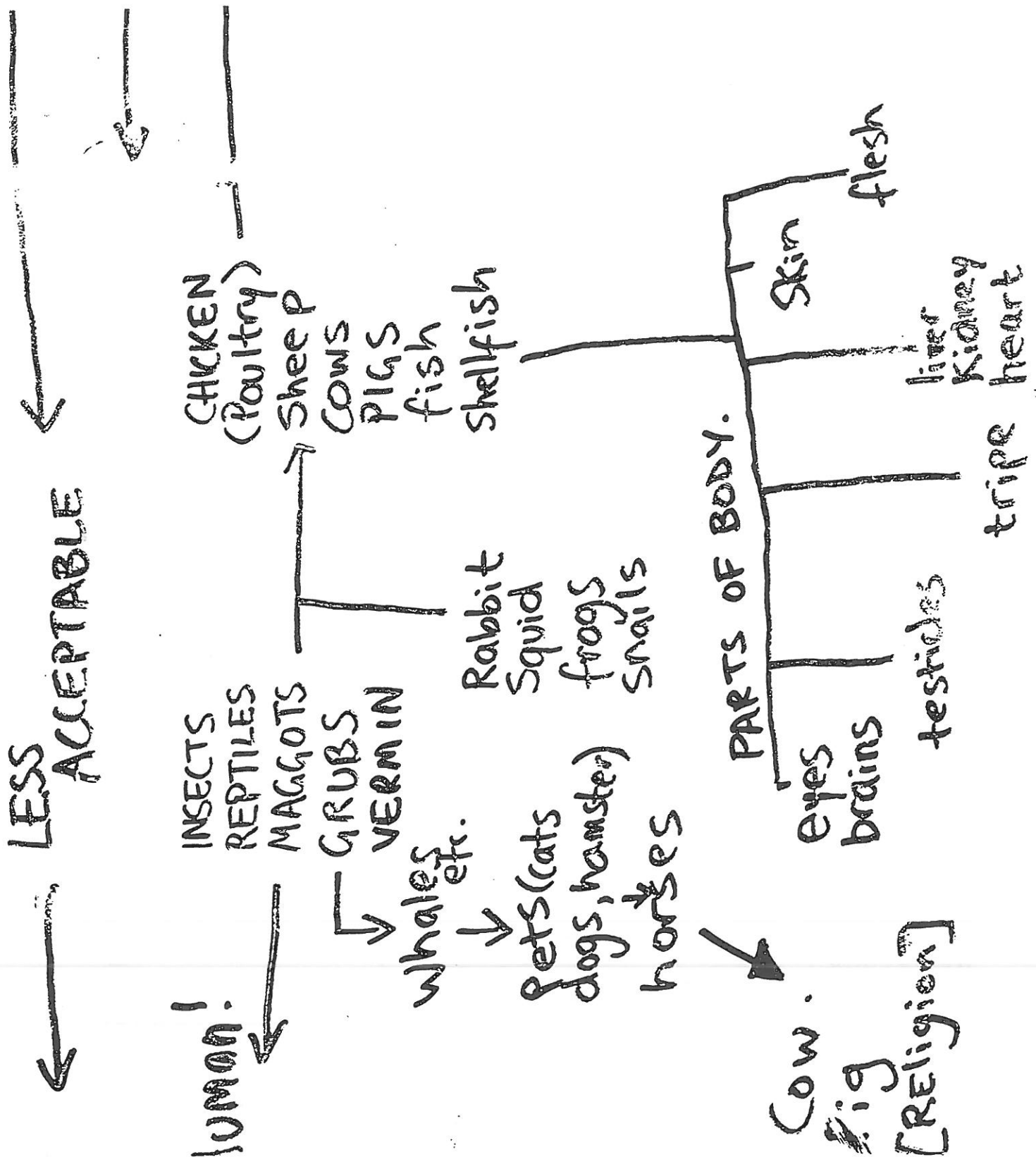
## Concepts behind the task

1. 'Society is constructed out of feelings of affinity and estrangement' (Bruce Lincoln, 1986).
2. 'It is culture which constitutes utility' (Marshall Sahlins, 1976) and not the other way round. In other words, we don't do things for practical reasons and then find a meaning for them. The **symbolic meaning** is what underpins our practical endeavours.
3. The rituals around food and the discourses of food help to construct the 'borders, structures and hierarchic relations that constitute society itself.' (Lincoln, 1986).

SAMPLE OHT 1

	Acceptable	Non-acceptable
Animals considered edible	Ones bred for food (pig, cow, sheep, deer, wildfowl, seafood)	Domestic / wild animals cats, dogs, horses, rabbits, hamsters, rodents, insects, snakes.
Parts of animal happy to eat	Liver, kidney, ribs, tripe, tail, tongue, heart, brain.	eye-balls, genitalia, lungs, ears, hooves.
Meat eaten normal food unavailable	If really desperate dog, zebra, horse, cat, snake, sparrow. Some people humans.	If starving would eat anything.
Vegetables never eat	Practically all, 	Strong tasting ones. No moral stigma attached.
Thinking if someone near them eating something they like	most people may feel disgusted, yet do not impose their views on others.	

SAMPLE OHT 2



SAMPLE OHT 3

