

IMMUNE TO A TWENTIETH-CENTURY PLAGUE

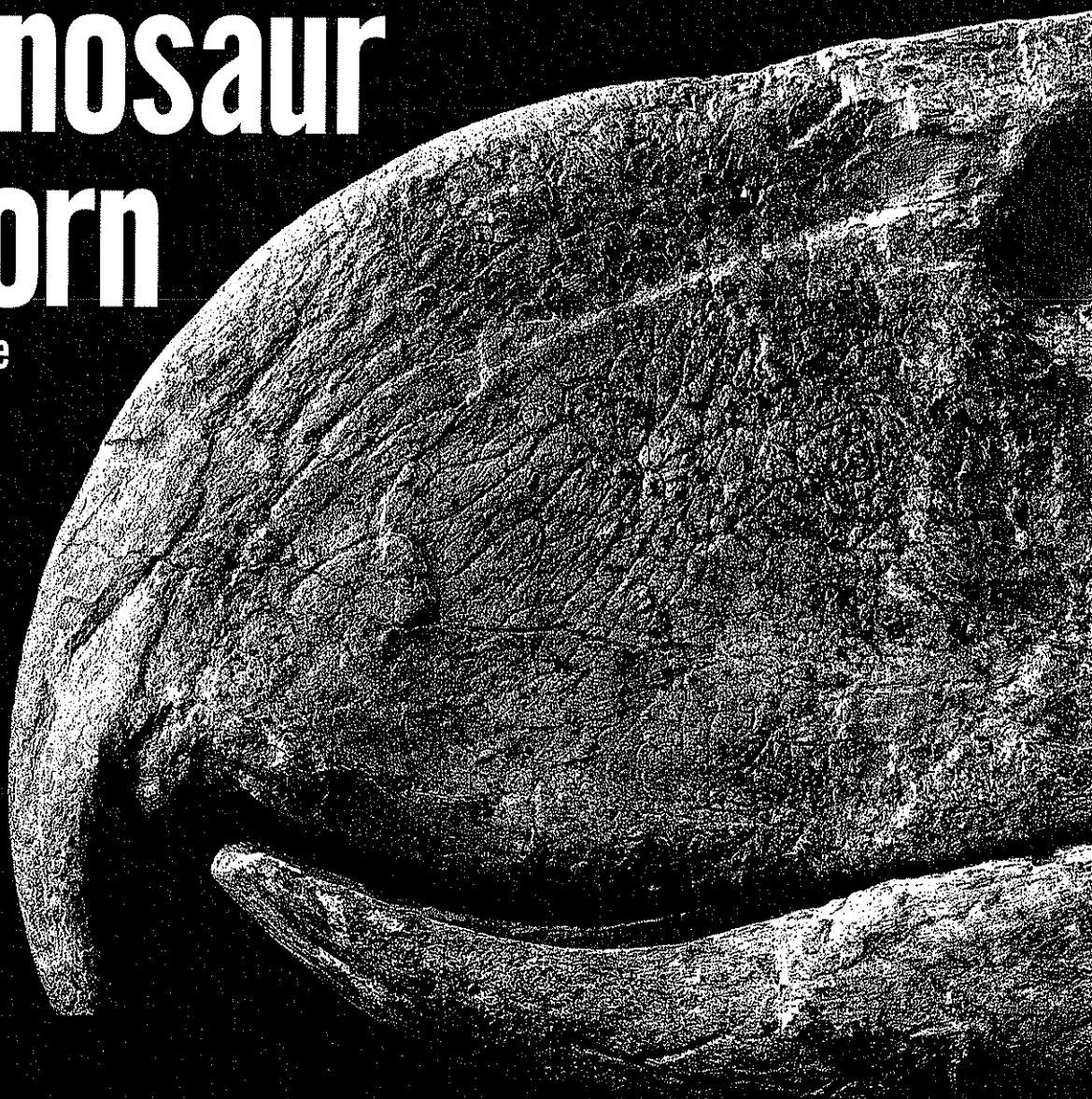
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## A Dinosaur Reborn

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in America, 40  
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had gone, life  
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# *Real Men Don't* Eat Deer

FIELD NOTES

BY KATHARINE MILTON

**T**HE POWERFUL BLAST OF A NEARBY shotgun brought me to my feet in a hurry. Though I'd been doing field-work with the Mat's for only a few weeks, all the hunting I'd observed had been carried out with blowguns or bows and arrows. I hadn't even seen a shotgun. Quickly, I looked out the doorway of my little hut, but there was nothing to be learned. During the day, an Amazonian village is generally a very dull place.

able respect and prestige. Yet no one came to cut up this deer; no one expressed the slightest interest in this large hide-covered bundle of chops and steaks. Finally I left, feeling puzzled. I returned an hour later but found the carcass lying just as I had left it. Now I was really confused. Why wasn't anyone cutting up the deer? Why would anyone shoot it if they weren't going to eat it?

One thing was clear. Since not a single Mat's ended up eating a bite of the deer, shooting it for

**You are what you eat, the saying goes. But what you don't eat says a lot too.**

Most adults scatter to hunt or work in the garden, and children leave to swim or play in the forest.

Walking in the direction of the shot, I spotted two young boys, and I asked them as best I could what had happened. They responded with animation, but my grasp of their language was so minimal that I couldn't understand much of what they said. I walked a little farther but, seeing nothing, decided to return to my hut, where I'd been sorting wild plants collected the day before. A little later several Mat's came by. One woman motioned for me to follow her. I did and was led into a small field of sweet potatoes growing directly behind a row of thatch-roofed houses. Lying in the field, not 20 feet from the back of the nearest house, was a large and quite dead white-tailed deer.

After examining the deer, I waited around for someone to butcher the carcass and distribute the meat. Meat is the most highly valued food among forest peoples, and good hunters earn consider-

able respect and prestige. Some villagers said the deer had been shot because it had ventured too close to the village and must have been a malevolent spirit. Others said the exact opposite: the deer should never have been shot because wild animals near the village were friendly spirits, possibly ancestors. Given the fact that the deer lay dead, I was inclined to believe the malevolent-spirit version of the story. Wasting costly shotgun shells on an animal one has no intention of eating seems to be an extravagant act, unless there was some very compelling reason to do so.

But why weren't they eating the deer? No one would come out and say that deer were taboo to eat, although they did say that Mat's elders didn't eat deer. Yet no one of any age, old or young, appeared interested in eating it. Not wanting to waste the meat, I asked for help in cutting off a hind leg, which I later chopped up and cooked. After the meal, however, I felt ill. Deer were certainly not a

ILLUSTRATIONS BY RICHARD DOWNS



taboo food to "my people," and logically I knew that deer meat is perfectly edible—but I must admit that eating something you know 165 people have refused does give you pause.

**T**HE MAT'S ARE AN ISOLATED group in a highly productive region of the Brazilian rain forest, south of the Amazon River and fairly close to the Peruvian border. During my three months as a visitor in their village, I learned that they had an incredibly long list of foods to avoid. They ate no insects of any type—a surprise, since every other indigenous group I'd worked with in Amazonia relished the nutritious large white larvae of palm beetles, as well as caterpillars, ants, and termites. Nor did they eat any anteater, armadillo, jaguar, snake, or stingray. I was particularly astonished when they told me they did not eat agouti, medium-size mammals that are eagerly hunted and eaten by all other indigenous groups of which I am aware.

Monkey flesh was another food they were pretty fussy about. Of the dozen or so local monkey species, only woolly monkeys and spider monkeys were eaten regularly. Indeed, so many woolly and spider monkeys were eaten during my study that I came to regard them as staple items of the Mat's diet. In addition, large land tortoises, which are generally a favored food among rain forest groups, could be eaten only by Mat's women and were totally avoided by men.

Why on earth would the Mat's avoid so many foods that other Amazonian groups relish? Before leaping to the conclusion that the Mat's are an irrational people, consider the diet of the average American. We do not sit down to a nice meal of horse, cat, or roasted larvae. Why not? These animals are highly nutritious and savored by many groups around the world. If someone was to ask you why Americans don't eat larvae or cats, your best response would probably be to mutter that these just weren't customary foods for us. And when I asked the Mat's why they didn't eat agouti or armadillo or insects, that is exactly what they said.

The more intriguing question is why Mat's, Americans, or any other society should have food taboos at all. Yet such taboos are universal. Two well-known examples are the Hindu prohibition against eating cow flesh and the Muslim custom of avoiding swine. There are scores of

less well known examples. Some Asians, for example, avoid eating chickens or their eggs, and many African herding peoples avoid eating fish.

Anthropologists have cooked up a smorgasbord of theories to account for the customs. In 1966 the British anthropologist Mary Douglas wrote an influential book, *Purity and Danger*, about the symbolic functions of taboos. She argued that adherence to the dozens of dietary prohibitions in the Old Testament reinforced the cultural cohesion of the ancient Hebrews. The Old Testament, Douglas noticed, tabooed animals—such as pigs or catfish—that did not fit into specific categories. For example, pigs have cloven hooves like cows and goats, yet they do not chew the cud. Catfish are fish, but they do not have scales. Perhaps, Douglas reasoned, eating only foods that belonged to well-defined groups helped remind the Hebrews of their identity as a group of their own.

The prominent American anthropologist Marvin Harris has proposed a far more utilitarian view. He argues that there are usually sound economic or health reasons for prohibiting a particular food. The ban on killing cows in India, he thinks, can be explained in the following way: In India, where wood is

milk, labor, and dung—make them worth far more alive than dead.

The Douglas school might retort that beneficial effects of the taboo do not prove its cause. The taboo, they might argue, may well have originated for more symbolic reasons, and only later acquired a secondary material benefit. India is the hearth of old-world vegetarianism, and ahimsa—the practice of avoiding injuring living creatures—is one of the foundations of Hinduism and Buddhism. This concept debuted around the fifth and sixth centuries B.C. and thus predated the ritualized reverence for the cow.

It does, however, strengthen Harris's argument to note that the sacred cow concept appears to have emerged in India around 200 A.D.—just when the population had become very dense. All arable land was needed to grow food for humans, not cattle, and forests were rapidly being chopped into firewood. By the fourth century, the concept had spread so completely that killing a cow carried with it the death penalty. Gradually, throughout India, the cow became a venerated icon, a symbol coming ultimately to stand for Mother India herself. Even today cow killing is banned in India's constitution.

How do these spiritual and materialist explanations transfer to the Amazon? Start by thinking tapir instead of cow. The tapir, a 300-pound relative of the horse, is the largest single packet of meat in the Amazonian rain forest. Tapirs lead a solitary, peaceful existence, wandering about eating fallen fruits and vegetation. Many peoples I have worked with in Amazonia consider tapir the best meat imaginable—the equivalent of jungle caviar. Yet American anthropologist Eric Ross, who worked in the Ecuadorian rain forest, discovered that the Achuara people prohibit eating tapir meat.

Ross proposed the following materialist explanation, in brief, for this puzzling behavior: Tapirs are big and fairly scarce in the tropical rain forest. Why be an expert hunter of something you rarely encounter? Thus, the materialist logic runs, the Achuara have a prohibition against eating tapir so hunters won't waste their time chasing after these rare and elusive beasts. This argument, however, ignores the fact that no one sets out to hunt tapirs per se. Why not kill and



scarce, cow dung is used to make cooking fires and walls for homes. Moreover, female cows provide milk, and male cattle pull plows or wagons. In other words, he argues that the products from cows—



eat tapirs when you run across them, and kill and eat other things the rest of the time—as do most other forest-based indigenous peoples? There seems to be some other reason the Achuara avoid tapir meat.

Another anthropologist, David McDonald, argues that indigenous groups may be practicing food taboos as “a primitive environmental protection agency.” He reasons that since different species of game animals tend to be sparsely distributed, they might easily be hunted to extinction. He came to this conclusion after examining the customs of 11 different Amazonian societies and noticing that each culture prohibited certain foods for subsets of the group—either by sex or age. These taboos, he argued, limited consumption of that prey animal, thus ensuring that no one species would be hunted to extinction. But though portions of this argument seem more or less reasonable, the hypothesis focuses only on dietary prohibitions affecting groups of different ages and sexes. It does not address the question of why an entire culture, such as the Achuara, does not eat tapir. If no one ever eats it, what’s the point? Who benefits except tapirs?

**I** BECAME INTERESTED IN the functions of food taboos in the Amazon after spending time comparing dietary habits of different groups. By luck, I studied two groups that lived in the same region of the Brazilian state of Pará on tributaries of the Xingu River. These two groups, the Parakana and Arawete, spoke the same basic language (Tupi-Gurani), but they were also so hostile toward each other that to enter the hunting territory of your neighbor was to risk being killed on the spot.

I kept track of their diets, dutifully noting what they did—and did not—eat. Gradually, I began to see an interesting pattern. The favorite prey species of the Parakana, I noted, were land tortoises and tapirs. Yet they ate no monkeys of any kind nor did I note any consumption of large forest birds.

Imagine my surprise to find that their enemies to the north, the Arawete, did not eat tapir and focused much of their hunting on large forest birds. Indeed, the Arawete not only ate birds but even

raised colorful baby macaws as mascots. Though at least one authority has reported that the Arawete eat monkeys, I noted no eating of monkey flesh by any Arawete during my stay. In fact, the only



monkey killed, a howler monkey, was killed so that it could be used for fish bait.

Slightly farther to the north of the Arawete are the Arara, Carib speakers who migrated into this region from the north many centuries ago. Their most preferred, most hunted, and most eaten prey are monkeys—a dietary item scorned by the Parakana and eaten sparingly, if at all, by the Arawete.

It thus appeared to me that each group was tabooing the animal most preferred and desired by its despised neighbors. In other words, the food prohibitions shared by all members of a particular group appeared to serve as identification badges, a type of cultural boundary marker that identified and unified the group members. As I and many others have noted, the indigenous names of these forest groups generally translate into something such as “the people” or “the true people” or “the real people.” The choice of this name implies that neighboring groups may be regarded as somehow different and in fact not quite human.

My friend Carlos Coimbra, Jr., a Brazilian anthropologist, noticed a similar pattern among the Zoro and Surui Indians, who, like the Arawete and Parakana, are neighbors and traditional

enemies. The Surui, he says, abhor deer meat, which the Zoro relish.

Unfortunately, isolated neighboring indigenous groups that retain traditional food taboos are increasingly rare. Once contacted, groups often begin modeling their behavior after outsiders, who are happy to eat whatever game animal they can shoot. After observing taboo prey such as deer or tapir being eaten with impunity and gusto, traditional dietary customs are gradually abandoned. I believe, for example, that the Mat’s traditionally did not eat deer. But the younger men, having seen outsiders eat deer, may have decided that the “trendy” thing to do was profess to me that they too ate deer—a practice of far less interest to older and less impressionable members of the tribe. Yet when confronted with a dead deer, no one of any age, even the young men, could actually force themselves to break the taboo and eat its flesh.

How are these differences so strongly ingrained? As we know, all humans are members of a single species, *Homo sapiens*, and we all look basically the same. What distinguishes human groups are cultural practices—our customs and beliefs regarding the proper foods, the proper clothes, the proper adornments, the proper behavior. The “fashions” of behaviors and beliefs serve as badges of a common identity.

The food taboos I observed in Amazonia help the Parakana or the Arawete or the Mat’s establish their own cultural identity, just as much as facial tattoos, lip and nose piercings, and other ritual practices do. In a world in which the support and comfort of your particular culture are all that distinguish you from the beasts of the forest and your “not quite human” neighbors, food taboos serve as a constant reminder of tribal identity and the behavior expected of “true” humans.

Moreover, since each hunting territory can support only a single group, fostering group identity is crucial to survival. Symbolic behavior helps erect a barrier that affirms group identity, thus strengthening group solidarity. But using symbols to establish group identity also underscores, perhaps unconsciously, how similar all humans are to one another. The “other,” once we take a really good look, turns out to be remarkably similar to ourselves. So similar, in fact, that with a few alterations of dress and practice—and diet—the “them” could become us. □