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THE AUTUMNAL FEAST OF THE MAD RIVER PEOPLE

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For many years, I have been conducting an ethnobotanical study of a group of culturally advanced humans who live in isolated communities along the northern California coast. Recent research suggests that they are best recognized as a distinct subspecies, *Homo sapiens ssp. klamathensis* (Coon, 1969). For lack of a better common name, I call them the "Mad River People."

Each autumn, at a time that they determine to be in the fourth segment of their eleventh lunar period of the year, the Mad River People gather for one of their major feasts and celebrations. For the most part, they have progressed beyond hunting and gathering, which means that almost every item that will be consumed during the feast must be purchased, acquired through bartering, or grown themselves. The exchanging of food items is common. Some scholars have suggested that this autumnal feast has religious overtones, but as I suggested (Smith, 1997), it may be associated with the onset of the rainy season.

Although there is variation from one group to the next, the feast proceeds essentially as follows. In the late morning or early afternoon of the feast day, male members of the family, often expanded to include friends and unmarried males, gather to devour large quantities of fruits and seeds. My observations and the detailed examination of fecal remains (Braun & Himmler, 1945) show that they consume a variety of plants, including *Arachis hypogaea* ("pee-nut"), *Corylus avellana* ("fil-bert"), *Prunus amygdalus* ("ah-mend") *Berthollettia excelsa* ("bra-zil nut"), *Anacardium occidentale* ("kash-oo"), *Carya illinoensis* ("pee-kahn" or "pee-kan"), and *Juglans regia* ("wol-nut"). In addition, the Mad River People eat the tubers of *Solanum tuberosum* ("pah-tay-toe"), which they have cut into thin slices, have incinerated in the fat of one of their domesticated animals, and have coated with a thick fluid ("dip") made from the mammary secretions of *Bos taurus* ("kow"). The liquid is often flavored by adding the pungent leaves of *Allium schoenoprasum* ("chīvz").

These various plant materials are typically consumed with vast quantities of psychoactive liquids made from the fruits of *Vitis vinifera* ("grāp") or from the grains of *Hordeum vulgare* ("bar lē"), *Triticum aestivum* ("hweet"), or *Zea mays* ("korn"). The fruits or grains had been fermented or distilled to yield beverages that contain about 3.5% to 50% ethyl alcohol. Preliminary physiological studies suggest that the Mad River People are especially fond of alcohol and consume it in greater quantities than do their kin who inhabit the Great Central Valley or the drier regions to the south.

After this preliminary phase, the males are called to a central feeding area by the females. They have already been working for several hours to prepare the major components of the feast. All of the participants sit around a common feeding table. If space is short, it is clear that participants are seated according to a seniority system. Children, and perhaps social outcasts, will be relegated to secondary eating surfaces, typically smaller and lower. A senior male or female, usually addressed affectionately as a "grand maw" or a "grand paw" (grand indicating a higher level of attainment or position in their hierarchy, and maw or paw indicating their sex) will lead the participants through the feast. It often begins with a request to close the eyes, bow the head, and listen intently while remarks are addressed to their principal deity ("Gawd"), who is thanked profusely for the food that the Mad River People are about to consume.

The main eating phase of the Autumnal Feast of the Mad River People now begins. They exhibit a fondness for the leaf blades of *Lactuca sativa* ("let-tis"), which they mix with other leaves, and sliced portions of the fruit of *Lycopersicon esculentum* ("tō-mā-tō"), the leaves of *Allium sativum* ("un-yun"), along with various other items and topped with carbohydrate derivative ("kroo-tons"). The concoction, called a "sal-ad," is decorated and flavored by covering it with a thick mixture made from the spoiled mammary secretions of the kow, often after it has been purposely infected with a mold (*Penicillium*

roquefortii). Some of the participants may be seen munching idly on the petioles of *Apium graveolens* ("sel-er-ee").

The emotional and gastronomic highlight of the autumnal feast now occurs. One of the females, often of the elderly grand maw class, places a large, dead bird at the center of the communal feeding table. At this point, the Mad River People will typically rub their hands together, smile pleasantly at one another, and emit the sounds "Ooo ... ohh ... aah." The bird, usually a *Meleagris gallopavo* ("tur-kee"), has been decapitated, eviscerated, de-feathered, washed, flavored, and cooked to render it edible. Maws and grand maws are the custodians of the details as to how this is accomplished. They pass along this knowledge only to their female offspring only through oral transmission. (Stewart, 1985).

An alternative method of dispatching the turkey involves the rapid application of a twisting motion to separate its head from its cervical vertebrae. This barbarous act is usually carried out only by an older male of the group. Small children are often prohibited from observing the event because it is so traumatic.

The body cavity of the turkey has been cleaned and stuffed with a mixture of water, fruits, cereal grains, and the leaves of *Salvia officinalis* ("sāj"), *Allium cepa* ("un-yen"), and seleree. The exact formula is also transmitted through the female line from one generation to the next and it is never committed to paper. I once attempted to make a video tape record of this procedure, but I was discovered and asked to leave.

An alternative protein source is also popular. It involves salting, smoking, or wet curing the hind leg of a domesticated form of *Sus scropha* ("pig"). They call the edible product "ham."

The turkey is often consumed with the underground parts of the *pahtato*, *Beta vulgaris* ("beet"), or *Ipomoea batatas* ("sweet pah-tā-tō"). Many of the Mad River People persist in calling the *I. batatas* "yamz," which they clearly are not. The confusion is understandable, in that most of them have never seen a true yam.

Even though the participants have ingested far too much food, the feast continues. A "pi" or "kāk," made from the matured ovaries of favorite plants, is served. One very popular type of pi at this period in their cultural evolution is made from *Cucurbita pepo* ("pump-kin"). The stringy and bland pulp is made more palatable by adding the powdered bark of

Cinnamomum verum ("sin-e men"). They must purchase it because the trees do not grow in the region. The pi or kak is usually consumed with very hot water that contains xanthine alkaloids leached from the seeds of *Coffea arabica* ("kof-ee") or from the leaves of *Thea sinensis* ("tee"). These beverages may be flavored with crystalline extracts from *Saccharum officinarum* ("shoog-er") or liquids expressed from the succulent hairs lining the ovary septations of *Citrus limon* ("lem-en"). Freud (1887) suggested that this fascination with eating these reproductive structures may derive from feelings of sexual inadequacy on their part. Clearly additional work is in order.

The autumnal feast of the Mad River People enters its final phases. If the weather permits, younger males often go out of doors and engage in an athletic event called "fut-bol." It consists of two opposing lines of participants who make grunting noises and who then crash into one another. This is done with such force that injury may occur. At other times they toss some inflated animal organ, perhaps a bladder, through the air. Here and elsewhere, some males are clearly more proficient than others at playing futbol. I was never asked to participate, an entirely reasonable judgement on their part. They tend to be larger than average individuals and they walk about in a characteristic manner. My studies suggest that many of them have more than the typical two sets of chromosomes (Smith, 1999).

Other males may isolate themselves so that they can inhale the shredded and burning leaves of *Nicotiana tabacum* ("ta-bak-o"). Studies of older, ailing adults strongly suggest that these incinerated materials are highly addictive, carcinogenic, and can lead to serious respiratory impairment. Younger members of the culture substitute a fumitory made from the pistillate bracts of *Cannabis sativa* ("gras" or "pot"). It is reputed to be the major economic plant of the region, supplanting the traditional practice of arboricide in the region. Inhalation continues until most of the participants have lapsed into unconsciousness.

The autumnal feast is over for another year. Soon it will be time to prepare for an even larger celebration that occurs very close to the end of their solar year. It is difficult to characterize. It involves elements of travel, stimulation of the economy through the exchange of gifts, and the reinforcement of a reward system for the children, who have been told that on a particular night their home will be visited by an elderly, rotund man in a brightly-colored suit. He apparently arrives by air in a device powered by eight domesticated *Rangifer tarandus* ("rān-dir").

I am assured by my colleagues in engineering that it is most unlikely that randir possess the aerodynamic capability to accomplish this task. He leaves behind items of value, presumably selected from a list that the children themselves had prepared in advance. Further elaboration of this celebration will be the subject of another investigation.

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