

Pacific Island gastrologies: following the flaps

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Many social scientists have been productively following the global flow of foods because this flow makes vivid – indeed, encapsulates – relationships between contemporary political economies. In this article, we focus on the movement of lamb/mutton flaps (sheep bellies) through a Pacific portion of the globe. Applying insights from studies of material culture, we show that the flow of a certain kind of fatty flesh – a flesh with significant material ambiguities – is particularly revealing of what are, indeed, asymmetrical relationships. When fatty flesh is a by-product deemed edible only in the developing world, its embodiment in the (often overly) fatty flesh of developing-world consumers lends itself to politically salient arguments about who is ‘dumping’ what on whom and with what effects; about who, if anyone, should be responsible for whom and in what ways.

During an early conversation we had with a New Zealand meat trader about the politically controversial sale of sheep bellies – lamb and mutton flaps¹ – from his country and Australia to the Pacific Islands, the trader stopped to convey something basic about his enterprise and the market: ‘You do realize’, he said, ‘that no one grows a sheep for its flaps; the reason flaps don’t bring a good price is because they’re too fatty for people who can afford to chose better. But someone will buy them when the price gets right. Meat never goes uneaten. It’s that simple’.

We certainly understood what he was saying. We had become interested in flaps because they are usually avoided by white New Zealanders and Australians but eagerly sought by many Pacific Islanders. For these New Zealanders and Australians, flaps, which often contain 50 per cent fat, are obviously not good to eat or good for one to eat. Moreover, unlike the analogous pork bellies, which can become bacon, flaps are not feasibly transformed into something more desirable. Because curing is expensive, there is no point in spending money to make a second-rate bacon substitute.² Attempts to transform flaps into ‘nuggets’ have failed because most fast-food eaters do not like the long-lasting, greasy after-taste of sheep meat. Other attempts to add value by, for instance, rolling them into inexpensive roasts for export to developing countries with an emerging middle class are only just underway. Yet, although currently representing only 3-5 per cent of a sheep’s carcass by value, flaps are 9-12 per cent of a carcass by weight³ (see Fig. 1).

However, as a cheap and plentiful source of meat, flaps do have appeal to the large numbers of poor people in developing Pacific Island countries. In fact, for many Pacific Islanders, eating meat at all – even in the form of cheap and fatty imported flaps – is now central to a vision of a modernist good life (Gewertz & Errington 2007). Certainly for many Papua New Guineans among whom we have long worked, flaps are the only cuts of sheep meat that are likely to come their way. Thus, while peripheral to the culinary life of the centrally located trader, flaps are central to the lives of our friends on the periphery.⁴

But is it as simple as the meat trader indicated? Of course – and as he knows – simple though the marketing principles of supply and demand might be, actually trading flaps, especially into the Pacific Islands, rarely is. Such trade is more than just grasping the global opportunity of making one people's trash into another's treasure. The fact that those 'treasuring' flaps often know that they are rejected as 'trash' by those providing them – as neither good to eat nor good for one to eat – makes such trade politically sensitive, if not fraught.⁵

In this paper, we explore some of the complexities that the trade in flaps reflects and creates in the Pacific Island region. In effect, we describe a cluster of what might be considered regional gastrologies as they are indexed and impelled by flaps. Gastrologies, as we mean them, include three intersecting components: gastro-geographies (who eats what, where); gastro-politics (who gets what food, from whom, under what circumstances, and with what consequences); and gastro-identities (who becomes what by virtue of what is eaten, relative to others).⁶ The Pacific Island gastrologies on which we focus are those of the geographically proximate recipients and former recipients of New Zealand and Australian flaps. The first gastrology is that of Papua New Guinea (PNG), where flaps are consumed to the satisfaction (albeit alloyed) of many. The second is that of Fiji, where flaps are banned to the regret of some. And the third is that of Tonga, where flaps are subject to ongoing debate among an influential few.⁷ In all three contexts, flaps (as they index and impel regional gastrologies) provide an especially conspicuous focus for wrangles about geo-political, post-colonial relationships and identities. And, as we shall argue, flaps provide such a conspicuous focus – more so than do many other foods – not only because of their materiality, but also because of their ambiguous materiality.

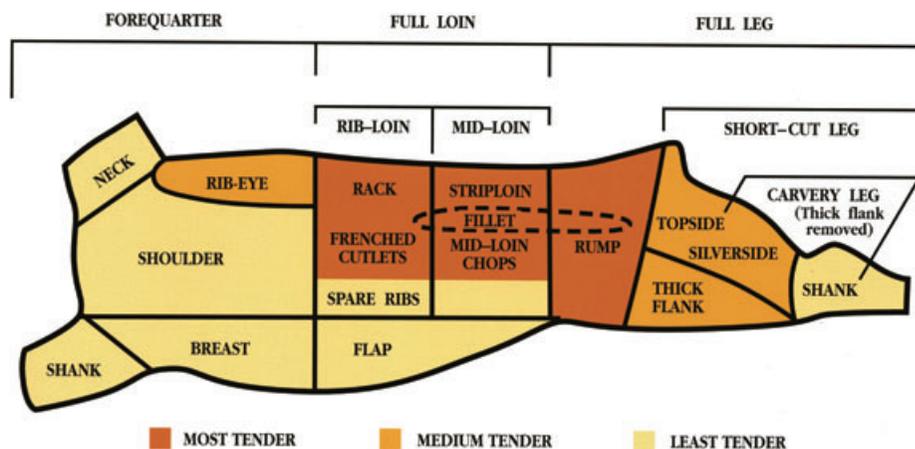


Figure 1. Lamb cuts (New Zealand Beef and Lamb 2007, reproduced with the kind permission of Rod Slater, Chief Executive of New Zealand Beef and Lamb).

On the ambiguous materiality of lamb/mutton flaps

To be sure, many foods may come to index and impel gastrologies. This is so, first of all, because food as an object is an externalization of, among other things, human labour and values – sometimes one's own, sometimes others'. In addition, food is an edible object that is consumed to sustain physical life, and some have more access to it than others. Further, food has a variety of physically appraisable characteristics that can be differentiated, such as taste, texture, and, as we shall see, calories. Moreover, once consumed, food has a ramifying materiality as it becomes another kind of an object. As body, it has other appraisable characteristics such as size, weight, and health. In this formulation, food is what you, in the company of others and in a range of ways, make and make of it and how it makes you, and them.⁸

All of this and more is true of flaps in their regional flow. As we have indicated, lamb/mutton flaps link and distinguish categories of people: those who provide and eschew, those who eat, those who are not allowed to eat, and those who deliberate about whether or not to continue to eat. Furthermore, many of these recognize that they are in relationships of concatenating contention with each other. They recognize that the rather straightforward regional commodity chain that brings flaps from the first world to the developing world is embedded within a far-from-straightforward political economy, one that distinguishes first-world eschewers from developing-world eaters, non-eaters, and deliberators. Lamb/mutton flaps encapsulate and focus the contentions inherent in these first- and developing-world relationships especially well because they are not only a food, but a food with significant material ambiguities – both as cheap fatty meat and as cheap fatty meat of a particular kind.

As cheap meat, flaps will (as the trader cited above understood) readily circulate in a market. Indeed, from the point of view of their producers, flaps must find a buyer. As fatty meat, from the point of view of their consumers, flaps have the capacity not only to nourish but also to over-nourish – and to over-nourish so as to contribute to serious diseases (see Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Lamb/mutton flaps, just out of the half-carton (photograph reproduced with kind permission of Nancy Sullivan).

Many health professionals think this trade in flaps has had a role in creating unhealthy Pacific Island bodies. Most agree that diets high in animal fats contribute to obesity, hypertension, heart disease, and diabetes. And they agree that, while these diseases have been on the rise world-wide, they have risen dramatically in some Pacific Island countries.⁹ In fact, health statistics do reveal an alarming picture in Tonga and a serious picture in Fiji. PNG is something of a mixed case: while over-nourishment in urban areas among the relatively affluent is increasing, under-nourishment in rural areas and among the urban poor, especially concerning lack of protein, is a serious problem.¹⁰

But, in addition to their capacity both to nourish and to over-nourish, flaps have other importantly ambiguous attributes. Never produced for their own sakes, they are in a sense by-products: as such, they lie between the state of being a product (that produced through a process for a given purpose) and being a good (that existing as a state with a given value). Moreover, flaps lie ambiguously between the cheap fatty meats that constitute world-traversing, highly caloric, branded and patented fast foods (such as McDonald's hamburgers and Kentucky Fried Chicken pieces) and the cheap, fatty meats that constitute regionally distinct, highly caloric, ethnic foods (such as Italian 'lardo' [Cavanaugh, 2005] and Afro-American 'chitlins' [Poe, 1999]). Unlike the first, flaps do not evoke an imagined, *international* community of flap-eaters. After all, many Pacific Islanders know that they are by-products that white people refuse to eat. Nor, unlike the second, do flaps (yet) generally evoke a valued way of life. After all, many Pacific Islanders know that they are a recent introduction from elsewhere.¹¹

The gastrologies indexed and impelled by the ambiguous materiality of flaps are both summarized and compounded in what is, perhaps, the major wrangle concerning Pacific Island relationships: whether or not lamb/mutton flaps are dumped by regional first-world countries on developing countries. A good example of the wrangle concerning dumping appeared in a 2002 article written by the Asia-Pacific correspondent to the British newspaper *The Independent*. This article articulated themes subsequently reiterated in the international press after the death of the King of Tonga. His obituaries frequently described him as the world's most enormous monarch, the leader of 'a nation where coconut flesh and mutton flaps are dietary staples' (Fonua 2006; see p. 604 below).

Pacific Islanders' fatal diet blamed on Kiwi exports

Only the choicest cuts of New Zealand lamb find their way to European dinner tables. A very different type of meat – a fatty offcut called mutton flap – is exported to the South Pacific, where it contributes markedly to the region's dire health problems.

Mutton flap, known locally as 'sipi', has become a staple protein in poor Pacific nations. While islanders regard it as a delicacy, governments have condemned New Zealand for 'dumping' the inferior meat. The Prime Minister of Tonga, Ulukalala Lavaka Ata, dismissed it recently as 'hardly edible'.

Tonga is threatening to ban sipi – chunks of bone and fat cut off the end of top-quality chops. Also exported from Australia, it forms part of a diet blamed for the Pacific's alarmingly high rates of obesity, diabetes and heart disease. Fiji outlawed mutton flaps in 1999 [actually, in 2000].

New Zealand's Health Minister, Annette King, said it would be 'morally imperious' to dictate what other countries ate. Meat producers said they were merely meeting demand ...

Sipi is just one type of low-grade meat exported to the Pacific, in a practice that Rod Jackson, professor of epidemiology at Auckland University, calls 'dietary genocide' ...

A fellow epidemiologist, Robert Scragg, was equally scathing. 'Australia and New Zealand have made a big song and dance over the years about French nuclear testing,' he said. 'Mutton flaps have caused more deaths in the Pacific than 30 years of nuclear tests.'

New Zealand is paying a price, however. Many Pacific Islanders exploit family links in Auckland to seek costly dialysis treatment. Medical bills are often left unpaid – and the government is threatening now to clamp down (Marks 2002).

As the article makes clear, accusations of ‘dumping’ (allied with references to dietary genocide and nuclear contamination) are often efforts to disambiguate flaps such that they appear as fundamentally irredeemable, as ill suited for human consumption. Relying on the overlap between the alimentary images evoked by ‘to dump’ and ‘to dump on’, the accusations are efforts to insist that the trade in flaps (and other fatty meats) be appraised and regulated, not just in commercial but also in moral terms. Technically, dumped flaps would be those that enter the market as the result of (some sort of) subsidy and, because of this unfair advantage, skew the appropriate conditions of competition – perhaps eventually reducing consumer choice. However, in these accusations dumping does not refer to an unfair advantage in the market economy, but to one in the moral economy. On the other hand, as the New Zealand Minister of Health said, to dictate what those in other countries can choose to eat might be seen as morally imperious.

Thus, by virtue of their (persisting) ambiguous materiality, flaps are good to think and good to argue with. They are complex and act in contradictory ways. As we shall see below in three intersecting gastrologies, they are good to eat and too good to eat: as fatty flesh, they can nourish; as fatty flesh, they can over-nourish and produce fatty flesh. They are delicacies for the developing world and they are hardly edible offcuts (some, as we shall see, say waste products) from the first world. They sustain free trade and incite banning (as both good to ‘dump’ and dumped by those who are not good).

Gastrology one: flaps for Papua New Guineans

During 2005, 17,300 (metric) tons of lamb/mutton flaps were exported from New Zealand and Australia to some five million Papua New Guineans (for an annual per capita consumption of about 3.5 kg). Though sold primarily in towns, where there is the electricity necessary to keep them frozen or at least refrigerated, they do make their (thawing) way to many people in outlying villages. They have become a well-known feature of life. Indeed, whenever we mentioned to Papua New Guineans that we were studying the role of lamb/mutton flaps in their country, people of all sorts (professionals [including health professionals], businessmen, and the ‘grassroots’ in both villages and peri-urban settlements) almost universally smiled and shrugged. The smiles, we think, signalled recognition that Papua New Guineans did eat lots of flaps. The shrugs signalled slight embarrassment that we white people – we eschewers – knew that they did so. Lamb/mutton flaps are salient to people: Papua New Guineans not only consume them, but think about them.

To learn in more detail about the role of flaps in the lives of Papua New Guineans, during 2006 we hired local students from Divine Word University to administer some three hundred questionnaires in five towns – Madang, Goroka, Mount Hagen, Gusap, and Kerowagi. After collecting basic demographic data, the students asked: how often and when did informants eat flaps; what brands of flaps did they favour and why; what meats in ceremonial contexts were flaps replacing; whether eating flaps had health implications; and, finally, whether flaps should be banned by the PNG government.

Below, we summarize two interviews conducted in the highland town of Goroka so as to convey how flaps flavour Papua New Guinean lives.¹²

From a 24-year-old man, originally from (coastal) East New Britain province, who lives with his wife's family in a settlement outside of Goroka and works as a store clerk, earning K[ina] 70 a fortnight (US\$23):

He supplements his income by cooking and vending bite-sized portions of lamb/mutton flaps at the market, buying about 4 cartons a week¹³ [see Figs 3 and 4]. He'll buy a quarter or half carton at a time. The business is lucrative, especially on the weekends, when there are lots of drunks around who enjoy a snack. There are many people like him who buy flaps to sell at the market, at the side of the road, or at mini-shops. But, it's common for people to buy cartons to feed those attending a party – for example, after a sporting event, for a business opening, or during a political campaign. Lamb/mutton flaps are also often served at church events or as part of customary occasions such as wedding celebrations, mortuary rituals, and compensation payments. In the Highlands, pigs remain the most valued food at these customary occasions (as does fish from where he comes), but more and more people are substituting lamb/mutton flaps because they are tasty and affordable. It's true that lamb/mutton flaps are fatty, but most people do not care about this since the meat is cheap and delicious. They have become a normal part of major ceremonies. Therefore, the government cannot ban them.

From a 32-year-old married man, originally from a coastal area of the Morobe province, who lives in a settlement near the Goroka Secondary School and works as a security guard earning K120 a fortnight (US\$40):

He buys flaps in small packages about three times a week. He has attended reconciliation ceremonies where flaps were cooked and then exchanged between the feuding parties. He also buys cartons for birthday celebrations. He knows that, in the past, pigs, as symbols of hard work and big-manship, would be brought to all ceremonies, but thinks that lamb/mutton flaps are rapidly replacing them in importance. Though some object to their greasiness, he likes them, believing that they have helped him become big and strong. Yet, he grants that many people are dying because they cause heart disease and asthma. He thinks that they should be banned because New Zealand and



Figure 3. Waiting to buy lamb/mutton flaps in Goroka (photograph: Frederick Errington).



Figure 4. Selling lamb/mutton flap pieces at a market in Goroka (photograph: Frederick Errington).

Australia are dumping them in Papua New Guinea. Papua New Guinea should only accept quality meat from these places.

And, finally, we offer data from an interview we conducted concerning those undernourished and protein-short Papua New Guineans with uncertain incomes, often living in peri-urban settlements. This is from a 52-year-old widower – one of our oldest PNG friends – who came to Madang with his wife in 1981, fleeing their home community next to Chambri Lake for fear of sorcery:

He got a good job as a grader at a sawmill. However, the company was sold and he was demoted to the point where he quit. Now, living on the outskirts of Madang, he supports himself and his six children (his wife died years ago) by the occasional sale of carved artefacts to tourists. When he doesn't make a sale, he has no money for food and, therefore, the family must go without. While he enjoys socializing with his Chambri neighbours, he often finds it difficult to concentrate on the conversation because he is famished. But he certainly wouldn't mention his hunger lest it be interpreted as a request for food from others likely as cash-short as he. In fact, several years before, when his youngest child was 8, he had to tell him that he had become too old to cry when hungry. And the first food he bought

for his son when we hired him to help with our work was lamb/mutton flaps. Everyone in the family enjoyed them and the way they flavoured rice and greens.

* * *

In the gastrology of Papua New Guineans, the ambiguous materiality of lamb/mutton flaps as cheap, fatty, imported meat is generally accepted and often seen as useful, albeit with reservations. In the corpus of our interviews (as well as in those cited above), we discovered that some Papua New Guineans like flaps more than do others. Some like the greasy taste *per se*, or like the flavour it gives to carbohydrates and greens; others find them too greasy. Some believe that they are strengthened by flaps; others, that they are sickened – mentioning ailments ranging from heart attacks to (the more medically dubious) asthma, arthritis, and even, in several interviews, sagging skin. However, virtually all Papua New Guineans will eat flaps if they can get them.

This is the case because flaps provide many Papua New Guineans with a taste treat, if not the food they need to survive under difficult circumstances. In addition, lamb/mutton flaps have become increasingly important, often central, in constructing various forms of sociality through exchange. After all, as cheap meat, flaps are easily available. They do not, for instance, require the long-term nurture of labour-intensive pigs (nurture which one of our well-educated PNG friends said made sense only for those with nothing better to do). And because they can be presented in various multiples of cartons, flaps are reasonably impressive and readily matched to the occasion. They are, in other words, both convenient and sufficient and, as such, they allow urban dwellers (with money) to maintain ties to village kin as well as to extend relationships to urban friends, colleagues, and neighbours. Lamb/mutton flaps are not only protein but protean in their capacity to be used flexibly: they are edible tokens of on-going and shifting commitments.

In this regard, Papua New Guineans are adding value to flaps. They allow the creation of ties that variously bind – and do not bind. However, to take another's rejects and use them for one's own purposes remains, for many, a compromised accomplishment.

Papua New Guineans do know that lamb/mutton flaps are rejected by white people – that they are embodying what white people won't embody. And this knowledge, we think, leads to a diffuse social anxiety that may be reflected in the diffuse range of maladies attributed to flaps. Indeed, we suspect that the issue of dumping as a health or other concern would, for many Papua New Guineans (though certainly not all), go away if they thought that white people did eat lamb/mutton flaps – since, then, what was good enough for 'them' would be good enough for 'us'. Consequently, Papua New Guineans sometimes worry that their bodies, identities, and socialities depend on 'treasuring' what they know to be other people's 'trash'. Hence the smiles and shrugs we mentioned earlier.

Papua New Guineans have, on occasion, gone beyond the smiles and shrugs. An early instance of what have been sporadic but recurrent statements of complaint about flaps was made in 1996 by Daniel Kapi, then Executive Director of the PNG Consumer Affairs Council. He protested that '[l]amb flaps are not "meat" ... in the sense of what ... [white people] would consider meat'. Though not advocating a ban on the import of flaps, he asserted that exporters had 'a moral obligation not to dump cheap junk on us' and demanded (albeit with little result) that they should only send flaps which had '90 per cent meat and 10 percent fat' (as reported by O'Callaghan 1996).

Gastrology two: flaps for Fijians

At about the same time as PNG's Daniel Kapi was calling for the regulation of lamb/mutton flaps, other influential Pacific Islanders were expressing similar concerns in public statements. In Fiji, their concerns actually resulted in a ban on lamb/mutton flaps in 2000.

One Fijian veterinarian, a member of the Agriculture Department at the time the ban was implemented, explained it in the following way. In the mid-1970s, the only meats allowed into Fiji were from New Zealand and Australia – and, eventually, beef and goat from Vanuatu. However, the more expensive cuts from New Zealand and Australia were going elsewhere. Fiji was getting the cheap cuts that most people could afford. During the 1980s, there was a call to replace cheap meat from abroad with locally produced chicken. Yet, although the poultry industry grew, people continued to buy lamb/mutton flaps because they remained cheaper. During this time, health surveys began to indicate an increase in lifestyle diseases, particularly heart disease. Then, in the early 1990s, the ten-year quarantine that Fiji had placed upon a flock of imported Barbados Black Belly sheep was lifted. These were sheep adapted to the tropics that some Fijians hoped would become the basis of an indigenous ruminant industry. In fact, a rough analysis of the relative fat contents of flaps from New Zealand and from Barbados Black Belly sheep indicated that the New Zealand flaps were much fattier. This finding was mentioned to colleagues in the Health Department with the suggestion that a ban on the importation of flaps might be a good idea.

So, all these considerations – poultry interests, health concerns, and hope for an indigenous sheep meat industry – convinced Fiji's Minister for Commerce, Business Development, and Investment to take action. He implemented a ban, not on the importation of lamb/mutton flaps, but on their sale in the country – a ban that would apply to all flaps, even domestically produced ones. He did so on the carefully selected grounds that flaps were 'likely to cause the death of a person, or to injure, or to adversely affect the health or well being of a person' (Kumar, Legal Notice No. 14, 2000). As Fiji had acceded to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1996, this phrasing, taken from Fiji's Fair Trading Decree, was designed to conform as much as possible to WTO provisions. Under the WTO category of 'Technical Barriers to Trade', products can be regulated in order to protect human health and safety providing these regulations do not discriminate between trading partners or between locally produced and imported goods.

Not surprisingly, these efforts to regulate or ban the sale of lamb/mutton flaps alarmed those with trade interests (Slatter 2003: 5), especially in New Zealand (the primary supplier of sheep meat to Fiji). Robert Hughes, a nutritionist who worked for the South Pacific Commission (SPC), told us that when he and his colleagues began – in 1996 – to study the role of fatty meat imports as contributors to the rising rates of obesity in Pacific Island countries, the New Zealand Trade Commissioner put pressure on the SPC to drop the issue.

Once the ban came into effect and despite its careful wording, those with trade interests argued that there was no scientific evidence to suggest that lamb/mutton flaps were inherently unhealthy. Further, they argued that singling out lamb/mutton flaps as a health risk was arbitrary, given that many products, including butter and the corned beef produced in Fiji, have as much fat as do flaps, if not more so. All in all, most felt that this ban 'provided a really highly undesirable precedent in international trade'

(Gerry Thompson, then General Manager of Meat New Zealand, as quoted by Choudry 2002) and should be challenged by the New Zealand government under the guidelines of the WTO. Nonetheless, the Fijian government held its ground.

As it turned out, the New Zealand government – while strongly supporting free trade – was coming to regard the Pacific Island trade in lamb/mutton flaps with some ambivalence. This was the case, an official in New Zealand's Pacific Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade explained to us, partly because a recent Minister for Health from New Zealand (the previously mentioned Annette King) had been frequently embarrassed when travelling in the Pacific by Islanders demanding to know how she could justify her concern with promoting healthy lifestyles when her country's exports undermined these lifestyles. Relatedly (as the newspaper article quoted earlier also indicates), New Zealand had been compelled to provide medical services such as (expensive) renal dialysis to Pacific Island diabetics from certain countries with which it has special relations (especially Tonga, Samoa, Tuvalu, and the Cook Islands); such procedures were straining the medical budgets of urban district hospitals in New Zealand. Finally, this official said that, while the ban was troubling, ethnic conflicts between indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians and the uncertain state of Fiji's democracy were far more worrisome.

In addition, we should note that the ban did not have that much effect on New Zealand exports into Fiji. In fact, during 1999 (the year before the ban), out of some 10,200 (metric) tons of sheep meat imported into Fiji from New Zealand, only 211 tons were of lamb/mutton flaps.¹⁴ This is in contrast to some 2,908 tons of forequarters (which do not have the flaps attached). Indeed, we heard from New Zealand traders that lamb/mutton flaps had been only a relatively minor part of the sheep meat trade into Fiji.

The ban also does not seem to have had much effect on the health of Fijians. Another member of the Department of Agriculture told us that he had been right to oppose the ban as ineffectual. Many poor people, he said, just moved to the next cheapest sheep meat: to the still fatty 'curry pieces', necks, shoulder chops, and sausages. Indeed, the frequency of diseases has likely increased since the ban (as the statistics in note 10 indicate). That being said, most Fijian health professionals still believe that the ban was a step in the right direction.

The ban did go into operation relatively smoothly. The government had provided the public with advance notice and with information about the health risks of eating flaps. Such messages seem to have worked. Our conversations and interviews indicated that there was little public outcry over the ban, few customers expressed confusion when they found flaps no longer available, and most Fijians accepted that the ban was for health reasons. (The scattering of letters-to-the-editor on this subject supported the ban as a health measure.)

Furthermore, based on 185 interviews conducted for us during 2006 by two graduate students from the University of the South Pacific, a majority of Fijians living in or around the capital city of Suva (both indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians) thought that the government should protect their health by whatever means necessary. (None the less, many acknowledged that the health of Fijians had not appreciably improved subsequent to the ban.) The students also asked how lamb/mutton flaps had been used – for family meals, for larger gatherings such as church picnics, or for other ceremonial occasions. Importantly, and in sharp contrast to PNG, all reported that while lamb/mutton flaps were used for family meals, they were *not* suited for

ceremonial occasions (during which it was necessary to serve fish or, depending on ethnicity, pork).

Several of those interviewed who supported the ban thought that it might foster local production of more nutritious food. This argument tends to have two dimensions. The first is that 'traditional' foods are healthier and that if people prefer imported foods it is probably because they have a post-colonial inferiority complex and/or have been seduced by Western tastes. Thus, nutritionists in Fiji note with concern that local fishermen come to the market in Suva, sell their fresh fish, and then buy canned fish to eat back home (Vatucawaqa & Chand 2002; Vatucawaqa & Owen 2002); or that local people buy imported rice and instant noodles rather than indigenous taro (Vatucawaqa 2002). The second dimension of the argument is that if people were to rely more on locally produced food, then food security and economic development would be promoted (Kelsey 2004). These locally produced foods could be traditional; they could also be direct substitutes for imports. Hence, the ban on lamb/mutton flaps could foster not only a more healthy and assured diet, but also, for example, the development of an indigenous ruminant industry.

Desirable as a shift back to traditional, or at least locally produced, foods might be, the question immediately arises as to its practicality. Fresh fish and taro cost more than canned fish and rice or noodles. For cash-strapped Fijians, whether fishermen or urban dwellers, these less expensive choices make at least short-term economic sense. Concerning import substitution of New Zealand and Australian sheep meat with that from less fatty, locally grown animals, work is, in fact, continuing in Fiji on further breeding of Barbados Black Belly sheep (now of a variety known as 'Fiji Fantastic') – and a range of Pacific Island countries have expressed interest in acquiring stock. However, when interviewed during 2006, the veterinarian who played a major role in developing the animals estimated that, even under the best of circumstances, Fiji could not hope to become self-sufficient in sheep meat for between twenty-five and thirty years. Additionally, such a commitment would involve diverting large amounts of land from other uses.

In the gastrology of Fijians, the ambiguous materiality of lamb/mutton flaps as cheap, fatty, imported meat was seized upon and run with. In fact, flaps became (to continue with an ovine focus) a convenient scapegoat: their ban had more political than practical consequences. Although the ban did remind Fijians to be mindful of what they ate, it did not significantly reduce the import of low-end meat, did not much alter the diets of most Fijians, did not decrease the high rates of diseases, did not change the ceremonial lives of any Fijians, and did not stimulate local production either of traditional foods or of import substitutes, though this might yet occur. However, the ban was an emphatic and popularly supported assertion of government power and responsibility to regulate regional trade relations in the national interest – to ensure that Fijians were not dumped on. (As such, perhaps the ban also projected a unity of the ethnically divided nation as well as the unity of the nation with the state.) Moreover, by reminding Fijians to be mindful of what they ate, it was also urging them more generally to be mindful of what was 'good enough' for them and their compatriots. In so doing, we venture, Fijians could compare themselves favourably to Papua New Guineans (as they like to do): Fiji's flap-free zone contrasted with PNG's flap frisson. In this contrast, Papua New Guineans would readily accept anything that came along and had a government that had neither the power nor the inclination to do anything about it;

alternatively, Papua New Guineans were too poor and under-nourished for flaps to be much of a problem. Hence, by asserting that flaps were not good to eat, the ban was multiply good for Fijians to think.

Gastrology three: flaps for Tongans

The only Tongans with whom we spoke about the traffic in cheap, fatty meat were in Auckland, attending a 2004 meeting of the Heart Foundation of New Zealand. The occasion was to announce the results of a Foundation-sponsored study concerning the consumption of fatty, brined beef brisket – ‘*povi/pulu masima*’ – by Pacific Islanders, primarily Tongans and Samoans, living in Auckland.¹⁵

Among those present at the meeting were some thirty-five Pacific Islanders – nutritionists, dieticians, educators, pastors, community members. Mafi Funaki-Tahifote, the Tongan dietician in charge of the study, began with the history of *povi/pulu masima*. Salted beef was first brought to the Pacific by explorers, whalers, and missionaries and soon became a high-ranking food – one with ceremonial significance. This was so because imported foods were more prestigious than indigenous ones. *Povi/pulu masima* is still consumed, in part, because it is given by individuals and families to fulfil obligations and show respect. Relatedly, Samoan and Tongan communities often hold church and family feasts at which *povi/pulu masima* is necessary, feasts which strengthen bonds of kinship and express social solidarity. Thus, Funaki-Tahifote concluded, *povi/pulu masima* is a highly valued food which maintains the cultural traditions and social ties that constitute identity. Yet *povi/pulu masima* may well be a factor in the serious health problems that Pacific Islanders face in New Zealand – and at home. But it is only one of several factors. Consumption of other fatty meats as well as lack of physical activity are also involved.

In the subsequent discussion, certain issues recurred.¹⁵ Central among these was the degree to which traditions could be changed – especially ones so obviously important (indeed definitional) as the giving, receiving, and consuming of ceremonially appropriate food. Several people stressed, though, that culture shouldn’t be ‘pampered’ – used as an excuse to avoid taking responsibility. Others countered with what proved to be the dominant view: *povi/pulu masima* is part of Tongan and Samoan roots. While it is possible to increase awareness of health hazards through education, there is no substitute for it. The best that can be done is to cook it differently to eliminate some of the fat.

Throughout the discussion as well as in the subsequently published report (Heart Foundation of New Zealand 2004), it was agreed that Tongans and Samoans now ate animal protein as the central component of their meals. Indeed, the written report described them as often ‘bingeing’ on cheap protein, the most favoured examples, whether in New Zealand or at home, being *povi/pulu masima*, lamb/mutton flaps, and Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC).

Of this fatty trinity, those advising the Tongan government usually single out lamb/mutton flaps to argue that undesirable imports should be regulated to address Tonga’s serious rates of diseases. (Recall that, in the article about dumping presented earlier, the Prime Minister of Tonga characterized lamb/mutton flaps as ‘hardly edible.’) Thus, as part of a recommendation that the Tongan government place a quota on the import of all fatty meats – eventually to reach 50 per cent of the 2002 import volume – government consultants made particular reference to lamb/mutton flaps.

For mutton flaps alone – 2002 imports into Tonga were approximately 3 million kg which is approximately 500g per capita per week.

Mutton flaps contain approximately 40g fat/100g, half of which is saturated fat, and 420 kcal.

Reducing the consumption of mutton flaps and other fatty meats by 50% and replacing it with the same amount of fish (about 3g fat, mostly unsaturated fat, and 120 kcal per 100g) would therefore reduce fat intake by over 30g/day, saturated fat by over 15 g/day, and energy intake by over 200 kcal/day ... (Swinburn & Lawrence 2004: 2).

Significantly, this recommendation of a quota on fatty meat imports – especially on lamb/mutton flaps – was designed not only to confront Tonga's health issues, but also to conform to Tonga's position in a broader political economy. The recommendation was shaped to comply with strictures of the WTO, an organization which Tonga hoped to join (and did join late in 2005) with sponsorship by New Zealand and Australia. As we saw in the Fiji case (one closely observed by Tonga), WTO regulations allow trade to be controlled for documentable health reasons provided that no particular exporting country is discriminated against. That being said and despite the proposal's careful wording, the recommendation of a quota was tabled by the Tongan government lest it compromise the support of its first world neighbours with their export interests.

The recommendation was also shaped by the realities of what has been called a MIRAB-based political economy – a particular kind of dependency Tonga shares with other Pacific Island countries (though not with PNG or Fiji). As Evans makes clear:

[L]arge-scale migration of islanders from the South Pacific to a variety of locations (most notably Australia, New Zealand, and parts of the western United States) has resulted in significant flows of cash and material from overseas migrants to kinspeople remaining in their natal areas (that is, *Migration and Remittances*). Foreign-aid donations have also resulted in the movement of large amounts of resources into South Pacific states and underwritten the development of sizable government bureaucracies (that is, *Aid and Bureaucracy*) (1999: 138).

Tonga, in fact, gets by on aid and remittances. Inasmuch as what economic activity there is focuses on aid-dependent bureaucracies, urban centres are growing, leaving the countryside increasingly under-populated. Consequently, the traditional agricultural resource base is under-utilized with a concomitant reliance on imported food – food bought not only with urban salaries, but also with remittances from abroad. In this situation, lamb/mutton flaps – as cheap meat from countries on which Tonga is multiply dependent – cannot easily be banned. The most that can be hoped for is regulation through a quota.

In the gastrology of Tongans, the ambiguous materiality of lamb/mutton flaps as cheap, fatty, imported meat is both double-edged and confounding. Flaps cannot be embraced and they cannot be eliminated. As noted above, they are located between the cheap fatty meats that constitute world-traversing, highly caloric, branded and patented fast foods and the cheap fatty meats that constitute regionally distinct, highly caloric, ethnic foods. Lamb/mutton flaps are unlike the KFC that enters Tonga in tubs as gifts for families. KFC is not described as dumped on Tongans because, we think, KFC is popular among both white people and Pacific Islanders.¹⁶ Lamb/mutton flaps are also unlike the *povi/pulu masima*, which, too, is never described as dumped on Tongans. Although white people do not eat *povi/pulu masima*, Pacific Islanders have inscribed it with significant and distinctive socio-cultural meanings. This leaves lamb/mutton flaps – which white people do not eat and locals have not yet imbued with great value.

There are, it must also be noted, other fatty imports into Tonga (and Samoa) of considerable health concern. Among them are turkey tails, most of which come from the United States. While not significant imports into either PNG or Fiji (where tariffs protect local poultry industries), these flood many parts of the Pacific, including Tonga – especially those most directly under the influence of the United States (see Marshall 2004). However, although turkey tails (if eaten as staples) are likely to have serious health implications and are not consumed (as staples) by those who export them, they seem to have less symbolic salience than lamb/mutton flaps. Because lamb/mutton flaps are associated with the regional first-world powers of New Zealand and Australia, they draw most of the heat.¹⁷ As both the product and the symbol of the seemingly inextricable relationships of dependency, flaps become the repository not only of health concerns but also of post-colonial anxieties.

Conclusion

We have been arguing that food, as edible object, not only sustains physical life, but also has physically appraisable characteristics and consequences; and that these characteristics and consequences can be caught up in gastrologies. We have found lamb/mutton flaps especially effective in constituting such gastrologies in a Pacific portion of the world, and especially potent in marking and creating differences in the relationships between first-world and developing countries. This is the case because they have both a ramifying materiality and an ambiguous materiality. Lamb/mutton flaps are both a food and a food of a particular sort. As cheap, fatty, exported meat, they make a lot happen. They are expeditious.

Among other things: lamb/mutton flaps provide protein and calories to many poor Papua New Guineans and assist them to maintain and establish networks of sociality – albeit with some attendant distress since flaps may be white people's waste products that are dumped on them. Flaps enable Fijians to defend their bodies and define the parameters of their nation and state – and, in so doing, distinguish themselves from those Pacific peoples (like Papua New Guineans) with less mindful and weaker nations and states. Meanwhile, flaps both captivate and flummox Tongans. Moreover, the material fact that wherever flaps are consumed, their fatty flesh becomes bodies, some more healthy than others, leads to arguments about who owes what to whom and in what ways. This is an argument not only within a political economy, but also within what might be a moral one. This is to say, heavy bodies can lend weight to an argument: an argument that Pacific Island nations should not be dumped on by those who should know and do better – regardless of whether this is dumping in the technical sense of the word.

However, such claims made about relationships within a moral economy are likely to be countered – indeed, deflected – by arguments based on the ideology that people should be free to choose. This is an ideology that often involves an attempt to meld the political with the moral economy, much as New Zealand's Health Minister did (as discussed earlier) when she asserted that it would be 'morally imperious' to prevent Pacific Islanders from choosing to buy and eat lamb/mutton flaps.

A similar deflection was, we think, recently attempted in international press reports about the King of Tonga's death. At the time (what was presented as) his gigantic materiality was widely described – as in the following news account from the *Washington Post*:

At age 14, the future king was one of Tonga's top athletes: He could pole vault more than nine feet; he played tennis, cricket and rugby; and rowed competitively in a racing skiff ...

In the 1990s, Tupou IV led his 108,000 people on a diet and exercise regime aimed at cutting the levels of fat in a nation where coconut flesh and mutton flaps are dietary staples.

From a weight the Guinness Book of Records listed as heaviest for any monarch, 462 pounds, the king shed about 154 pounds (Fonua 2006).

Tupou IV was the embodiment of the Kingdom for other Tongans. But, in addition, his person became iconic for a world-wide range of others of a generalized Pacific Island gastrology: one in which places, relationships, and identities are marked and created through the trade and consumption of flaps. But what to make of this trade in fatty flesh made fatty flesh? The article implies that the King – who, by definition, could eat anything he wanted – chose to become fat on flaps (and coconut flesh). Who is responsible? What is to be done?

The article, in our reading of it, directs the answers ultimately to the King himself and, by extension, to individual subjects (and other Pacific Islanders). It suggests that through exercising will-power and dieting, all can approximate the good health of their (collective) youth – regardless of how flaps came to their shores (whether dumped on them or not). The choices, and the responsibility, for living the kinds of lives they wish to live seem ultimately, and appropriately, to be theirs.

However, if it can be said that the King was able to stop making bad choices (and able to pay for dialysis if any were necessary), it can also be said that his MIRAB-dependent people may not have the same range of opportunities. It is in such a world of poor Pacific Islanders that the material ambiguities of flaps remain salient. Neither product nor good; neither fast food nor ethnic food; both delicacy and deleterious; both nourishing and over-nourishing – flaps will continue to draw attention to themselves. They will continue to reveal the ambiguities – the asymmetries – that exist between first-world countries and developing countries. In this sense, flaps are to be commended.

NOTES

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¹ Although there is a technical distinction between lamb and mutton, the terms 'lamb flaps' and 'mutton flaps' are often used interchangeably by members of the public and so we use the combined term to encompass the range of usages.

² Unlike pork bellies, lamb/mutton flaps are too low in value and too unpredictable in price to support a futures market.

³ After initial processing, including cutting the carcass longitudinally through the belly and breast, the lamb/mutton flaps will be removed – one flap from each side. Then, the flaps will usually be packed into a heavy plastic bag placed inside a waxed carton, measuring about 52 × 40 × 18 cm and weighing approximately 20 kg. Cartons will be clearly labelled with the name of the processing plant and the country of origin. Cartons are often sold whole; or the contents of a whole carton will, while still frozen, be sawn in halves or quarters; or, for sale in smaller portions, the contents will be sawn into slices about three-quarters of an inch thick. In selecting among available flaps, customers are not necessarily concerned with the amount of fat relative to meat – and, indeed, flaps are rarely trimmed before cooking. Pacific Islanders tend to boil flaps in pots or cook them in earth ovens along with greens and carbohydrates. In addition, flaps may be cut into small pieces and grilled as snacks for sale at markets or at snack bars.

⁴ Carcasses had traditionally been sold whole to butcher shops. Butchers would process them and use the likes of flaps in, for example, sausages. But, during the 1970s, carcasses began increasingly to be cut into components at the place of slaughter. In Australia, this occurred in order to benefit from the growing demand

by supermarkets (taking over meat sales from butcher shops) for the more desirable cuts, more efficiently produced. In New Zealand, this occurred in order to benefit from changed trade agreements between New Zealand and the United Kingdom. In 1973, when the United Kingdom entered the European Economic Community, it imposed a weight quota on New Zealand meat imports. New Zealand filled this quota with high-value cuts like lamb legs and loins. Thus, processing plants in both Australia and New Zealand were left with a great many low-value cuts like shoulders and flaps; and this coincided with a growing Pacific Island market for inexpensive, fatty meats.

⁵ See, among others concerned with globally flowing foods: Bestor (2001; 2004); Brandt (2002); Cook (2003); Lind & Barham (2004); Watson (1997). In addition, see Phillips (2006) for a comprehensive review of the literature. As she makes clear, much of it is about shifts in the meaning and uses of foodstuffs as they move along commodity chains – in and through ‘food regimes’ (2006: 39). This is to say, the social lives of such foods provide good examples of ‘commodity careers’ (Appadurai 1986: 15). The one we document is somewhat unusual, concerning neither the transfer of desirable items (such as hamburgers or tuna) from the first world into appreciative markets elsewhere, nor the extraction of desirable items (such as tomatoes, papayas, or tortillas) from the developing world into the first. Rather, it concerns the movement of an item found undesirable in the first world into the developing world. Tracing such a commodity career – one in which what is not good enough for some becomes sustaining to others – lends itself to a mapping of politically compelling inequality, a mapping which may, as we shall see, be registered in accusations of dumping.

⁶ Here we are building on Feeley-Harnik’s argument that ‘gastronomy is geography’ because ‘foods are intimately linked to the place-times of their growing, making, and eating’ (1981: xvi).

⁷ In following the flow of flaps, we initially worked with the meat traders who were the intermediaries between meat-processing works and Pacific Island clients and consumers. In addition, to explore this Pacific Island trade we concentrated on PNG as the single largest Pacific Island market for flaps and a place where we could build on our substantial prior research in both rural and urban areas. We also conducted delimited field research in Fiji, primarily to understand the reasons for the country’s recent (2000) ban on the sale of flaps and the means by which this had been achieved. Finally, we focused on Tonga because of its serious problems with diseases and its struggle to formulate ways to regulate the imports of lamb/mutton flaps and other fatty meats. Though we have not visited Tonga, we did interview health professionals active there. In addition, concerning Tonga, we found especially helpful: Coyne (2000); Evans (1999); Evans, Sinclair, Fusimalohi & Liava’a (2001); Evans, Sinclair, Fusimalohi, Liava’a & Freedman (2003); Gailey (1987); Hau’ofa (1979); Hodge, Dowse & Zimmet (1996); Swinburn & Lawrence (2004).

⁸ This is to say, food constitutes bodies and creates socialities and identities. On the different ways in which these processes occur in the Pacific Islands, see Becker (1995); Pollock (1999); Stewart & Strathern (2001).

⁹ There is, of course, considerable debate concerning what the primary cause of this rise has been – whether, for example, it might relate to soft drinks, fatty foods, white bread, or lack of exercise. We hope to address this debate elsewhere.

¹⁰ The statistics for Tonga are especially alarming. According to Swinburn (2004), the obesity prevalence in Tonga is over 60 per cent. Moreover, 29 per cent of Tongans die of cardiovascular diseases, which are the leading causes of death for them. In addition, the rate of diabetes is high, at about 15 per cent of the population (having doubled in prevalence from 7.5 per cent in 1973 to 15.1 per cent in 2002). Statistics from Fiji are also disturbing. According to a 2002 assessment of 6,788 indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians between the ages of 15 and 64, the over-weight prevalence is 29 per cent and the obesity prevalence, 18 per cent. Moreover, 19.1 per cent of those sampled (21 per cent of indigenous Fijians and 16 per cent of Indo-Fijians) suffer from hypertension – and since in 63 per cent of these instances the disease was newly diagnosed, it appears to be on the rise. In addition, the rate of diabetes is 16 per cent (11.5 per cent of indigenous Fijians and 21 per cent of Indo-Fijians), with 53.2 per cent of these instances newly diagnosed (see Cornelius et al. 2002). The statistics from PNG are not easily found and are ambiguous. Those that do exist derive from studies of limited populations within particular areas of the country, and most were conducted some fifteen to twenty years ago. (For an excellent survey of the literature about the nutritional health of Papua New Guineans, see Hughes 2001.) One survey by the International Diabetes Institute is often cited. It was conducted in 1991 at Koki, a relatively affluent suburb of Port Moresby, the coastal capital city. The study suggests that both genetic factors and long-term urban residence are implicated in the extremely high Koki diabetes rate of 31.4 per cent for men and 33.6 per cent for women – a rate vastly higher than any other part of PNG, urban or rural. Hodge et al. (1996) report that the number of obese people (above the age of 18) living in rural areas was low, especially in the Highlands; the number was higher in urban coastal areas. Significantly, under-nutrition, including a lack of protein-rich, energy-dense foods, is more of a problem for many Papua New Guineans than is eating too much of the wrong kind of food. Thus, according to Gibson and Rozelle’s summary of a

1996 nationwide household survey, approximately 42 per cent of Papua New Guineans did not meet the target food-energy daily requirement of 2,000 calories (Gibson & Rozelle 1998; see also Gibson 2001). Gibson's data are supported by a 1999 Salvation Army Study of the Eastern Highlands countryside. There,

most people ate a meal only twice a day and sweet potatoes and greens made up the bulk of the diet. Animal protein, usually in small amounts, was included in the diet of families only 6 times per month on an average. The most commonly mentioned animal protein was lamb flaps (48%) (Muntwiler & Shelton 2001, as summarized by Saweri 2001: 157).

That being said, Temu and Saweri also describe those in peri-urban settlements as seriously vulnerable to undernourishment: '[O]ver 90% of food is purchased at the store or market and often this permits one meal, in the evening' (2001: 403).

¹¹ Flaps are importantly different from another fatty meat eaten in some Pacific Islands, namely 'Spam'. First of all, Spam is too expensive to be widely eaten in places like PNG. Indeed, even locally produced canned meat, such as corned beef, is losing out in many Pacific Islands (especially as refrigeration becomes more available) to less-expensive, frozen meats, such as flaps. Moreover, as Lewis (2000) makes clear, in the Pacific Islands where Spam is eaten, it is assumed that white people positively value (or valued) it. It has also become (especially in places like Hawaii) thoroughly traditionalized.

¹² Although more flaps are consumed in Highland towns than, for example, in the coastal town of Madang, according to our sample people throughout the country respond similarly to them.

¹³ At the time of the interviews, a 20 kg carton of lamb/mutton flaps in Goroka varied in price from between K102 and K110 (US\$34 and US\$37), while a 1 kg package varied between K5.95 and K7.90 (US\$2 and US\$2.60).

¹⁴ In 1999, Australia exported 872 tons of sheep meat to Fiji, none of which consisted of flaps.

¹⁵ *Povi* and *pulu* are cow in Samoan and Tongan, respectively; *masima* is salt in both languages.

¹⁶ Anthropologist Niko Besnier explained in a personal communication that the image of dumping recurs in other food-focused areas in Tonga 'such as the import of past-due-date processed food like canned vegetables and juices and junk food items like snacks ("Twisties")' (e-mail message, 11 February 2008). Of these items understood as sub-standard, the most objectionable would appear to be ones that those in the exporting countries would reject for themselves.

¹⁷ Interestingly, Samoa banned the import of turkey tails in 2007. This Pacific Island country is, however, under the direct influence of the United States.

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Gastrolgies des îles du Pacifique : ce que racontent les ventres de mouton

Résumé

Les études sociologiques qui ont pris pour objet le flux global des produits alimentaires se sont avérées particulièrement productives dans la mesure où ce flux illustre (incarne même) de façon vivace les relations entre les économies politiques contemporaines. Les auteurs s'attachent ici aux mouvements des ventres d'agneau ou de mouton dans la région du Pacifique. À partir de l'éclairage donné par les études de la culture matérielle, ils montrent que la circulation d'un certain type de viande grasse, chair porteuse d'importantes ambiguïtés matérielles, est particulièrement révélateur de ce qui est en réalité une relation asymétrique. Dès lors que cette viande est un résidu de production, jugé consommable seulement dans les pays en voie de développement, son incorporation sous forme de matière (souvent trop) grasse par les consommateurs de ces pays se prête à une argumentation politiquement prégnante sur qui « jette » quoi et à qui, et avec quels effets, et sur qui (s'il en est un) doit être responsable de qui, et de quelle manière.

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