

Portrayal of Culture: An Anthropological Study on John Baxter's Eating Eternity

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Abstract

Anthropology is the study of humans, past and present, focusing on culture, biology, language, and social structures. It uses methods like participant observation, interviews, surveys, and excavation to understand human existence. The anthropology of food examines cultural, social, and eating practices across different societies and time periods, and how food shapes the identity, social relationships, rituals, and power dynamics. John Baxter, a writer and professor, wrote "Eating eternity" and has published science fiction, novels, short stories, and a book about science fiction in motion pictures.

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Anthropology is the study of humans, past and present, focusing on various aspects including culture, biology, language, and social structures. It encompasses several subfields such as cultural anthropology, which examines the beliefs, practices, and customs of different societies; biological anthropology, which explores human evolution, genetics, and physical characteristics; archaeology, which investigates past human societies through material remains; and linguistic anthropology, which studies language. Its role in shaping human behaviour and society. Anthropologists use diverse methods including participant observation, interviews, surveys, and excavation to understand the complexities of human existence across time and space.

The anthropology of food is a field of study that examines the cultural, social and eating practices across different societies and time periods. It also explores how food shapes the identity, social relationships, rituals and power dynamics within communities. The study of anthropology of food is a subfield that links historical and ethnographic viewpoints with current social challenges in food systems of production and consumption.

Eating eternity was written by John Baxter. Baxter was born and raised in Sydney, New South Wales, and has resided in the United States, Britain, and Paris since 1989. He started penning science fiction for British periodicals such as *Science Fantasy* and *New Worlds* in the early 1960s. Despite being serialized in *New Worlds* as *The God Killers*, his debut book, *The Off-Worlders*, was released as a book by Ace in the United States. From 1975 to 1976, he was a visiting professor at Virginia's Hollins College. In addition to

curating anthologies of Australian science fiction, he has authored several novels and short stories in that genre and written a book about science fiction in motion pictures.

Mary Douglas, a British anthropologist, made significant contributions to the anthropology of food through her book *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. She argued that food serves as a powerful symbol for societies, expressing and reinforcing social boundaries, norms, and values. Douglas explored how cultures classify foods as “clean” or “unclean” based on purity and danger, often linked to broader cultural beliefs and social hierarchies. Her insights continue to influence scholars in anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies, shaping our understanding of food’s role in shaping identities, beliefs, and behaviours.

Eating eternity starts with the chapter ‘Bon Appetit’ deals with food as a cultural symbol. Baxter refers to Jean Anthelme Brillat savarin ‘s *The physiology of Taste*. Food, art and culture are interconnected as Mary Douglas says in her *purity and danger*. French culture was segregated into three tiers: the peasants, middle class, and clergy or catholic Church. Each estate signified its status by what they eat, and the aristocracy consumed only the noble foods. Even food divided the people culture and their lifestyle. Potatoes and Turnips were considered as they were only fit for Animals. They don’t eat any fruits that touched the ground, since it was believed that such contact was poison, similar to Jains.

In October 1671, Madame de sevigne, remembered for letter writing, she wrote letter to her pregnant daughter. She wrote about chocolate in the letter, in the time chocolate was only recently introduced in France. The letter, Madame de sevigne wrote to her daughter is

“But what do you have to say about chocolate? Are you not afraid of how it can burn the blood? What is all the effects that appear miraculous mask some sort of diabolical combustion? What do your doctor say? In your fragile state, my dear child, I need your word that you will not drink it, because I feel that you will suffer these problems. I love chocolate as you know. But I think it burn me; and furthermore, I have heard many terrible stories about chocolate. The Marquise de coetlog on drunk so much chocolate when she was pregnant last year that she gave birth to a baby who was Black as the devil and died.” (chapter 4: Feasts at Versailles, pg no: 36)

John Baxter ‘s *eating eternity* delves into the ancestor of chocolates and modern form of chocolate. Marie Antoinette, the queen of Louis XVI, dislikes the taste of her morning medication. So she asked her court pharmacist sulpice Debaube to make it palatable. Mixing drug with chocolate, can sugar and almond milk he pressed it coin like disc called pistoles, the ancestors of today’s chocolate bar.

It portrays cheese as a natural symbol, cheese was made into crusty baguette it was mid-day meal for sizable percentage of France with a glass of red wine. The choice of cheese from their home could affirm one’s cultural identity. From middle-ages cheese was a primary source of protein for the peasantry, typical it contains 30% of protein and 30% of fat that almost same as red meat and vegetables. Cheese can be made even in the poorest kitchen with the simplest ingredients. Soon variance of cheese appeared, to preserve and add flavours to cheese they were wrapped in vine leaves, rolled in herbs, peppercorns.

Jean Anthelme Brillat says “A meal without wine is like a day without sunshine”(Chapter: 11, cheese as a national symbol, pg no: 91). Now he added that “A dessert it without cheese is like a beauty with only one eye” (chapter:11, cheese as a national symbol (chapter 11; cheese as a national symbol, pg no: 91). The rise of cheese from own element in the French diet to national symbol began early in the 19th century. Sugar are expensive so the people preferred to end the meal with cheese.

John Baxter refers to biblical references in *Eating eternity*, the importance of bread describe that no food embodies such complex symbolic meaning as bread. Since Biblical times, it has represented

the irreducible minimum required for survival. In Bible, John 6:33-35, talks about the bread. 33 for the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. 34 'sir' they said always give us this bread. 35 then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life".

The chapter surreal cannibals focus on the time 1859, Darwin's on the origin of species, the theory of evolution gained acceptance and some people feared that eating them verged on cannibalism. The bodies of slaves are captured and crucified during the spartacist revolt in the first century BC was sold for sausage meat. These were process to gelatine and glue or ground left for animal fertilizer. This can be compared to Montaigne 's of cannibals, where he says Europeans are cannibalistic.

John Baxter also talks about Napoleon who preferred potatoes, beans, lot of bread which he drunk in soup or used to mop up gravy. Margeno became regular feature a this table and in the eyes of emperor a lucky one. Dun and omitted crayfish, the emperor protested "you will bring me bad luck". Napoleon enjoyed eating but he understood food's seductive power. In woody Allen 's love and death Napoleon is also worried about competition. The power of food in influencing culture and monarchy is profound and multifaceted. Throughout history, food has served as a symbol of wealth, power, and status, shaping the cultural identity of societies. In the realm of culture, food plays a central role in defining national identity and heritage.

In Purity and Danger, Douglas analyses how food practices reflect and reinforce social boundaries and cultural norms. Food serves as a metaphor for purity and contamination, with certain foods being deemed acceptable or taboo based on cultural beliefs. In Eating Eternity, food takes on a symbolic significance as well, representing the temporal and ephemeral nature of human existence. The characters' interactions with food mirror their experiences with time travel and the transient nature of life.

References

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