

Food, Hunting, and Taboo

Cultural Heritage in Practice

By Niels Kayser Nielsen

When we drive across Jutland at the weekend to get to and from our summer cottage on the west coast, on the stretches through the plantations of central Jutland we often pass a row of cars parked on the verge or up a forest road; we may also glimpse a group of men in camouflage clothes with dogs and guns. It is a turnout of hunters. This is the weekend, time for battle. Some deer are going to bite the dust; or a fox; or a few hares and a couple of pheasants – whatever the season has to offer.

You breathe in the morning air or enjoy the sunset, depending on the time of day. And you remember. The ticklish feeling in the stomach in your childhood, when, armed with an air rifle and a pocketful of pellets, hands damp with excitement, you crouched behind fences to shoot sparrows; or the foxhunts with dachshunds in your childhood, and later in adult age the fresh smell of raw elk flesh at Nämknäs in Österbotten in Finland, on those blood-red autumn days, when the meat from the hunt was divided up at the local cooperative butcher's. Always that pleasingly acrid smell of freshness, blood, and game – and nature.

And then there is the myth in our family about my maternal great-grandfather, the agricultural labourer and crofter with his eighteen children (with two successive wives, mercifully), who had to make a living at times by poaching on eastern Fyn, and who was taken by surprise one night in Rønninge Bog, so that he had to jump in the water and stay there with only his head above the surface until the danger had passed. He survived. So did his children, but the oldest ones had to be put in a children's home when their mother died. Among them were my grandmother, who told me the story.

But how natural is hunting, when all is said and done? That is the question to be considered here, together with another question: How come we still go hunting when it is no longer a necessity of life? Is it done out of love of nature? If that were the case, then we might content ourselves with a brisk walk. Is it out of concern for the wild animals, an element in game preservation? Surely nature can take care of that herself. Is it due to ancient instincts and aggression? No, that kind of argument does not sound credible. Is it not a reflection of a desire to get out into "God's free nature"? In that case, there would be no need to shoot anything. In short: these answers are insufficient. We must look elsewhere.

My thesis here is that hunting involves cultural heritage in practice. In this case one inherits not by looking and observing, but by doing. At the same time, hunting also says something about inheriting: what we inherit is not authentic, but always reshaped. Inheritance does not consist of reproduction but also of reworking. In this sense, hunting is an expression of the combination of traditionalization and detraditionalization. Or in more concrete terms: hunting condenses both a tradition-filled residue of a self-sufficient economy and an ultra-modern perception of nature. Hunting combines cultural elements with very different temporal rhythms. Hunting is simultaneously an expression of our ambivalent attitude to nature and culture, and to history and habit, so that hunting, despite its seeming lack of ambiguity, is filled to bursting point with paradoxes.

These opinions are indebted to Simon Schama in his major work *Landscape and Memory*, where he says that the way we view and interact with nature conceals

myths, memories, and obsession, going back to time immemorial; in other words, despite our mechanical relationship with nature, we also carry on a heritage that rests on a symbiotic relationship with nature. Schama points out that the duality of culture and nature is often understood too exclusively, as two complete opposites. In his view it is wrong, since for all our cultural-ality a healthy portion of nearness to nature lives on, despite all manner of notions about nature as being one (Schama 1995: 14).

Besides the aim of illuminating hunting in itself and the relationship between hunting and food, I intend to examine the culturally transmitted aspect of hunting: that culture is not just one thing, that culture is ambivalent, a process rife with internal contradictions. Just as phenomena like nation, gender, class, ethnicity, and identity are not unambiguous entities but always in conflict and change, the same applies to the concept of culture and its transmission. Culture – and cultural heritage – does not exist as a fixed and defined entity with a beginning and an end. Culture and the cultural heritage keep moving, containing conflicting elements which help to keep the pot boiling, to keep culture alive. If it were not for this internal tension, culture would lose all its ambiguity and thus stiffen and die. There would be nothing to inherit.

So when we still go hunting, even though it is not necessary, it is due not least to the fact that hunting, like culture, is a ritual replay of a number of central themes in our lives, especially including our problematic relationship to nature, which we constantly seem to need to rework symbolically and ritually. But what is a ritual, and how can one speak of hunting as a ritual?

Hunting and Ritual

The point here is that hunting, like any other ritual, contains ambivalences, paradoxes, and conflicting tendencies. These ambivalences are not primarily of a social kind or, if you like, have nothing to do with economic cycles. The hunting ritual is not connected with tensions in social history. As Catherine Bell (1992:106) has said, people do not come to a ritual to have their social problems solved; people come to a ritual to thematize problems of a *longue durée* character, more profound, less visible problems at the bottom of our mental preparedness, which go back hundreds of years, sometimes back to classical antiquity and the beginnings of Western culture.

At the same time, it is important to remember that ritual contains a bodily dimension (Kayser Nielsen 1997a:123ff.). Ritual always includes motion; it is about display, manifestation, and representation. Ritual cannot be reduced to a state of consciousness; it is rather a state of action. Ritual is not something one thinks, but something one does. Rituals are not messages but situations.

This means that rituals cannot be rationalized after the event. The ritual is not an expression of a plan that precedes the action. The ritual should not be understood as coming from an idea about what one wishes to express and then expresses. This outlook could lead to the notion that ritual is a concerted phenomenon with no contradictions. Yet rituals are not like this at all. They are situation-bound thematizations of tensions and conflicts. Rituals assemble, concentrate, and configure themes of life which appear disconnected and full of tension, but in such a way that this tension is thematized in a particular traditional form, which is, so

to speak, inherited by negotiation. The tension is at once present and in the process of being eliminated. In other words, the form of the ritual is important in that it is the actual formal course of the ritual that gives the sense of eliminating the tensions inherent in the content. One admits and thematizes the inherent tensions and ambivalences, one clothes them in a form which makes it possible to relate to them in the shape of a "ritual mastery" (Bell 1992:107ff.).

This ritual mastery has the character of an exchange between the body and the surroundings. As a rule, rituals are always enacted as a performative practice in a spatial context (Kayser Nielsen 1997a:125). Via actions in a space, an arena is created, which in turn has a reciprocal effect on the body that moves through the space. In this connection Catherine Bell (1992:99) speaks of the circularity between the body and the surroundings.

This is the core of hunting. It is a formalized series of actions in a space where the actual hunting arena has a physical reaction on the people involved. They take part in the hunting, they help to shape it by virtue of the actions that they perform in the situation, but at the same time they are themselves coloured by the hunt and its essence. No one comes away from a hunt unmoved or innocent. One has, in a literal sense as well, dirt on one's fingers, soil under one's nails, and perhaps even blood on one's hands.

But what are the profound ambivalences that are ritually thematized in the hunting situation? At bottom it is the distinctively European dual view of nature. To begin with, however, when dealing with hunting it seems to be relevant to shed light on our view of meat and food. This view is not

acquired in pure, unmediated form, but through a cultural lens which has a classifying effect via preferences and taboos. Let us therefore begin by looking at this and then go on to examine which view of nature serves as the foundation for our taboos. I do so on the basis of the conviction that hunting ultimately consists of a culturally inherited thematization of our view of nature which is expressed, for instance, in the values we attach to meat and food.

Food and Taboo from a Cultural Point of View

The fact that meat is so highly desired in the European culture group, and perhaps especially in Northern Europe, need not be due to biological necessity. This is what a biologicistic approach would claim: that we eat what is nutritionally good for us. But perhaps it is because meat has a distinctive status and meaning. Just think of the gondoliers of Venice, who are often seen with a matchstick in their mouths. This symbolizes that they have just eaten, that they can afford to eat meat and therefore have little shreds of meat stuck between their teeth. Meat is not just of high nutritional value, but also of high cultural value. When the Britons started eating meat on a grand scale again after the austere post-war years, it need not have been because of a bottled-up physical need for proteins. The explanation may just as well be the desire for social and cultural distinction: meat was an excellent means to show that new and better times had arrived, and that they could afford to partake of this prosperity.

This social challenge to the biological thesis that we eat meat because it is nutritionally good for us is one side of the matter. The other side concerns the ques-

tion of food considered from the semantic point of view. For it turns out that we do not use meat arbitrarily. As in other cultural contexts, we operate with order and classification; this is what culture consists of. In other words, meat eating is regulated.

This regulation takes place through the tabooing of certain foodstuffs. Although meat seems to be exceptionally suitable as food, it is simultaneously hedged with suspicions, prohibitions, and taboos. So much meat is theoretically available to us, but we would never dream of eating it. There is probably far more “forbidden” than “legal” meat. We reject the majority of the potential meat that is at our disposal (Simoons 1994:297). Meat is surrounded by more prohibitions than plants. Or to put it another way: it is only when food has passed the cultural hurdle that consists of prohibition and taboo that one can begin to adopt a stance on selection criteria such as taste, price, nutritional value, and so on (Simoons 1994:298).

This tabooing is a controversial phenomenon. People have widely varying views of what types of food should be tabooed. More exactly, the grounds for the taboos are rather different. They vary from ecological common sense to psychological explanations to reasons that have more to do with philosophy and the history of religion.

One scholar who has claimed that ecological considerations lie behind the tabooing of certain types of food is Marvin Harris. He maintains that when the Hindus abstain from beef as food, it is because people in India are well aware that it is ecologically unsound to eat plant-eating cows when one can just as well go directly to the source and cook and eat the plants, besides which it would be unwise to eat an

animal that covers several central needs. An ox can draw the plough in small spaces that cannot be cultivated by tractors, and it can take narrower turns, which is an advantage in small plots. A 35-horsepower tractor may be able to plough the soil ten times faster than a pair of oxen, but it costs twenty times as much to buy. Oxen provide fertilizer which can be used as fuel, and the sacred cow can supply milk (Harris 1986:57f.). From such a pragmatic ecological point of view it is wiser to protect cattle than eat them. The latter would be equivalent to farmers in the past using all their grain to make bread, leaving none for seed. Here Harris quotes Gandhi’s statement that the Indian cow was worshipped not only because “she gave milk, but because she made agriculture possible” (Harris 1980: 253).

Harris has a similar explanation for the taboo on pork as meat in the Middle East. Here too he thinks in rational, materialistic terms: the shortage of trees and the dry climate in that part of the world do not favour pig keeping, since pigs crave shade, water, and mud, as well as a varied diet. Cattle do not have such sophisticated demands. So the Jewish and Muslim taboo on pigs as food may be regarded as a kind of cultural rationalization after the event: the animal was difficult to manage anyway.

Harris’s explanation may seem simple and plausible, and we know of some equivalents from Danish cultural history. For instance, the local historian H. K. Kristensen has looked closely at pig keeping in western Jutland in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Here too it was difficult to breed pigs because of the shortage of forest. The pigs of western Jutland therefore got their “pannage” (pasturage in woodland, feeding on acorns and beech-mast) in the

more forested eastern parts of Jutland. These mast-fed pigs tasted better than pigs kept in sties, people claimed. But when the pannage in southern and eastern Jutland ran short in the course of the eighteenth century, tastes changed, and now pigs kept in sties and fed on oats, vetch, and peas became the best. Some people even maintained that pork from mast-fed pigs was dangerous for nursing mothers, and that the milk could harm the suckling infant (Kristensen 1978:30). This is not a case of a true taboo, but we cannot ignore the degree of rationalization after the fact and adaptation to given circumstances.

This brings us close to our first point: that it can be difficult to draw the line between a practical and “natural” explanation on the one hand and a symbolic and cultural explanation on the other. For where does one begin: is it the case that the pragmatic strategy constitutes the foundation and is then enclosed in symbolic rituals? Or is it the desire to create meaning and order with the aid of symbolic strategies that is the starting point, and these are later given a pragmatic justification? With these questions in mind, we may now approach the other approach to the explanation of taboo, which stresses the symbolic effect of establishing order and meaning.

This type of explanation is represented particularly by Mary Douglas. In her view, when pigs were tabooed, it was because they were unclean in classificatory terms. Pigs could not be made to fit the taxonomy. She refers to the Old Testament laws about the kind of meat that was considered edible. It was only meat from animals which chew the cud and have cloven hooves, that is, primarily cattle, goats, and sheep. Pigs, which are not ruminants, meet only one of

these criteria and are therefore in a classificatory no man’s land. They are outside law and order and thus unclean and inedible (Douglas 1966).

Partly related to this kind of explanation is the kinship taboo, which has been explored by the Swedish ethnologist Karl-Olov Arnstberg. He asks the question: how come we find cat food disgusting and believe that we would be defiled if we ate it (Arnstberg 1994:15ff.)? The answer is that the cat is too close to us so we cannot eat its food. Likewise, we cannot eat cat flesh because the cat is almost a friend of the family, and how could we eat our friends? This is, according to him, also the explanation for the taboo on eating horse and dog. And as for the taboo on pork, he shares Douglas’s view, but he also believes that the prohibition on pork is due to the fact that pigs, like humans, are omnivores. In other words, food taboos like these are associated with cultural “laws” which say that the things which are closest to each other also need the greatest possible symbolic difference: it is at the boundary that differences are most visible. Ultimately, this is once again a matter of classification, order, and meaning.

Arnstberg’s approach is taken to its extreme by Marshall Sahlins (1978:175), who claims that what is edible to humans is determined by an inverse relationship: what is closest to us is also most inedible. With gentle irony Sahlins talks about our “sacred dog”, which we respect and honour and talk to, as if it were one of the family, and about its self-assured conviction that it is protected when it comes to being eaten. According to him, biting into dog meat would be akin to incest. An outsider would say that we have tabooed dogs as food. In this connec-

tion Sahlins also makes the interesting observation that the animals we give names to are, as a rule, the ones we do not eat, whereas inedible animals do not deserve names (Sahlins 1978:174, note 6).

Frederick J. Simoons's view is based on another type of explanation. He explains the antipathy of Jews and Muslims to pork as going back to the time when they were nomads and wished to make a clear distinction between themselves and the settled farmers who found it easier to keep pigs, while the latter could create an independent self-image and build a cohesive culture by rejecting the camel meat that the nomads ate. Conversely, Islam is an example of the use of a special kind of meat, in this case camel, as a cultural and identity-creating symbol. Here the taboo has its positive antipole (Simoons 1994:199).

One significant factor remains to be explained, however: that it is also taboo to eat meat that is far from our housekeeping and cuisine. Fox, bear, and wolf are not considered edible, even though these animals could be optimal foodstuff as biological nutrition. They are wild animals with low-fat, protein-rich meat. Yet here we must admit that the biological explanatory model has its limits; it must ultimately yield to culturalistic elements. Of course we cannot wholly ignore the fact that people generally eat what is good for them, but this is not a universal and invariable rule. Perhaps in the final analysis it is also more important to study the relationship between food and taboo as a research object than as a research concept, that is to say, that it is more important to look at how the concept is used by people in real life than to aim for scientific precision (Arnstberg 1994:17). When all is said and done, scientific precision is less

decisive than the question of what meaning taboos are used to express.

We must thus look elsewhere to find explanations, and here it is natural to return to hunting and the folk view of the relationship between nature and culture. Perhaps we can find in the very essence of hunting an explanation for why we – as part of our cultural heritage – find certain wild animals inedible and therefore taboo them. The thesis is that we are dealing with a distinctive European outlook on nature, which in hunting we translate into cultural heritage, not just as an idea but also in action.

The Sentimentalization of Nature

In the course of the eighteenth century there were a number of crucial changes in our Western European view of nature. The sentimental outlook, which emerged as the twin to the worship of utility from the middle and especially the end of that century, was the foundation for a romanticizing view of nature, expressed, for instance, in the emotional infatuation with the garden as a concentrated form of nature. Agrarian was contrasted here with Arcadian. This meant a contrast between those who cultivated the soil and those who cultivated nature (Larsen 1997:106ff.); those who cultivated – in the original sense – the soil were now perceived as less cultural than those who savoured nature.

This nature worship resulted in the creation of gardens and parks which were supposed to look natural. In other words, they were not so much supposed to be nature as to be *like* nature. As the pioneering English gardener J. C. Loudon pointed out in 1830, interest in gardens is strongest in countries where the cultivation of the soil is at its most advanced, whereas gardens

are inappropriate in countries where the soil is not cultivated to the same extent (Thomas 1984:262). Paradoxically, this emotional approach to nature as constructed nature requires a distanced relationship to nature. The “English garden” had to grow up naturally in a country where enclosures with hedges and devotion to agriculture had placed the landscape in new frames.

In contrast, this sentimental view of nature appears to have caught on much later in the desolate forested regions of Scandinavia. Here, right up until the twentieth century, it was a far more certain sign of civilization, especially among farmers, to clear the trees and till the soil around the houses and the village, making sure that the “dangerous” forest did not gain the upper hand. Here nature was something to be feared. As late as the 1930s, a Finnish crofter in Karelia said that there had to be a large open area around the farm, so that one was not swallowed up by the forest (Virtanen 1998:42f.).

But the “wild” and sentimental view of nature also appeared in other countries than Britain, when the “kingdom of necessity” was receding and there was a surplus in relation to the immediate utility value of the soil. The history of landscape painting tells us about this; the art historian Jørn Guldberg (1997) has shown that painters tried to reduce nature’s traces of cultural landscape after 1850, when nature was staged in such a way that it invited admiration and astonishment. This is often associated with cultural scepticism and critique of civilization.

Simon Schama’s study of the cultural history of the landscape, which starts from his Jewish ancestors’ mythically and mystically coloured bison forest of Białowieża in the border zone between Poland, Lithuania, and White Russia, is in many ways to

be regarded as a historical illustration of the thesis of an increasing sentimentalization of nature in the years around 1800. Schama’s point is that, while nature – also as landscape – is deep inside us, landscape is culture rather than nature (Schama 1995:61), and he illustrates this thesis by citing the Baltic German scientist Julius von Brincken’s uncertainty when he arrived at Białowieża in 1820. What was he to do with the forest? Should he adopt a utilitarian outlook or a historical and poetic one? And what was he to do with the bison? Should he count them and chart their prevalence? Should he examine the young bull that was brought to him, and undertake a meticulous anatomical dissection? Or should he savour the bison meat in the local inn? He was faced with a dilemma: whether to look at the bison and the forest primarily through his scientist’s eyes or as the emotionally and respectfully “poetic” man that he also was (Schama 1995:48ff.). Schama is in no doubt about the outcome, but he also knows how the history proceeded: von Brincken became poetic and sentimental and increasingly perceived Białowieża as a modern-day Arcadia; he saw it as one large, wild garden that was a fitting object for the longing for nature that typified the *Bildungsbürgertum* with their scepticism of science.

In Denmark this dual outlook on nature also had its consequences. One expression was in our view of the garden. Not only among the nobility and the bourgeoisie, but also among the rural populace as well, there was a rapidly spreading idea of an emotional relationship to nature. When the Grundtvigian cooperative farmers, thanks to hard work and “enterprise” in the late nineteenth century had achieved sufficient prosperity,

they now began to lay out gardens not just for utility but also for decoration, as a place to observe the beauty and differentness of nature. The freehold farmer Niels Kristensen of Oksbøl wrote with a certain degree of pride in a letter to his brother Terkel on 6 May 1898:

I have now put our garden in order, fenced it all around, planted 500 spruce (white), laid a lawn with the aid of green turf, etc. I shall now start the worst of the spring work, namely, moving the byre and demolishing the old one, but the days are getting longer now (Sørensen 1984:137).

New times have come to Oksbøl. The thematization of this spiritual surplus in the form of emotional nature worship is also clearly expressed in Jens Skytte's novel *Hjordkilds Have* ("Hjordkild's Garden") from 1907, where we read that

The very first autumn and winter, while the other men of Ugum, following ancient custom, were busy taking things easy, Kresten and Eskild set about trenching Kileageren to turn this piece of land into a garden (Skytte 1907:92).

A "wild" and organic nature is constructed, as an antipole to arable fields. This view of nature also influenced the outlook on hunting as a whole and poaching in particular (the same Jens Skytte and his brother were keen hunters). The desire to cultivate was accompanied by a longing for wildness: both wild landscape and wild and uncontrolled human nature (Thomas 1984:242ff.). The wild mountains and forests where nature was still intact were consequently believed to be the home and haunt of savage, primordial people, who were no longer scorned for their "natural" wildness. They were now also venerated (Thomas 1984:260).

This dilemma is condensed in the hunt.

The poacher, who is intimately associated with the sentimentalization of nature, now became a distinctive symbolic representation of our view of nature. He is a blend of villain and hero. Poor and dangerous, but also self-willed and self-sufficient. Gone now are the massive hunts with hounds of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, public events at which royalty and nobility manifested themselves – and were easily visible in the open landscape (Kjærgaard 1992:211). Hunting was increasingly individualized, and the most individual of all hunters was the lone poacher, hunting in stealth. He could now be made an object of folk idolization with its duality of fascination and fear.

The Folkloristic Other: Poacher, Fox, and Raw Meat

This folkloristic side of hunting has been well studied by the Swedish ethnologist Ella Johansson in her rich analysis of different types and typologies of hunting. Her study is based on fieldwork and conversations with elderly people in western Hälsingland in Sweden, one of the most southerly wildernesses in the country.

She too points out how the Swedish peasant in the course of the nineteenth century, especially the first half, became increasingly oriented to tillage; the yield of the fields was what counted. Peasants identified with the arable landscape and distanced themselves from the forest. The trading item of former days – shooting game to sell on the market at high prices – lost in value in relation to crops (Johansson 1997:74). This gave hunting opportunities to other groups of the population who had more use for the forest and its game than the farmers had. In addition, they were forced

out to the periphery of human settlement and hence closer to the forests and the bogs, living in small houses where they gained a livelihood from being day labourers, forestry workers, and servants – and also from the game in the forests.

This symbiotic relationship to the forest, however, was not without consequences. As Gísli Pálsson (1996:74) has put it: “Hunting activities are frequently regarded as love affairs where hunters and their prey seduce one another; hunters must enter into relationships with game animals in order to have any success and *vice versa*.” It is at least certain that the folk view of hunting contains the idea that hunting could run in some people’s blood for generations, so that the instincts of the game have their counterpart in the hunting instinct.

This idea is found in numerous versions all over the world and seems to go so far back in time that one may rightly speak of a *longue durée* figure. Frederick J. Simoons, basing himself on the theories about the omnivore’s dilemma formulated by the psychologist Paul Rozin – “is it dangerous or healthy?” – argues that this notion is the origin of the idea that “you are what you eat” (Simoons 1994:305). Certain groups in East Africa eat the heart or the blood of lions and leopards to acquire the strength of the animal. Some Indian tribes ate dog meat to gain the courage of the dog, and so on. But the reverse also applies: that people wanted at all costs to avoid acquiring the characteristics of certain animals and therefore tabooed them as food. This view of the food potential of different animals also seems to occur in European hunting folklore.

A particularly great risk of being infected by animals in this way is believed to have

made itself felt among poachers, for whom working with the soil was torment, whereas “running with the gun” felt like a liberation, which outsiders must no doubt have regarded as a kind of self-destructiveness. For the same reason, poachers were also regarded as bad husbands and fathers, since their way of life was not compatible with a sense of social responsibility and normal modes of self-discipline. A passion for hunting was better suited to young bachelors and eccentrics.

This symbiotic and passionate relationship to the forest, where trees and game enter one’s blood and threaten to “devour one”,¹ contains yet another relationship to the forest as regards ownership. Strictly speaking, the concept of ownership cannot be used in this context. Unlike the farmers’ view of their cultivated private property and their right to the part of the forest that they might own, the hunter and the poacher rather had a reciprocal relationship to the forest and to game. “Owning” the forest is thus one thing, but it is quite another thing when the folklore speaks about “collecting” things from the forest. Rather than utilizing and exploiting the forest, this meant benefiting from it by accepting what it had to offer, whether mushrooms, berries, or game. It is not like an ownership relation with an objective mastery of the forest, but rather treating it as a helpful partner. It is a relationship on an equal footing, and it is always essential to stay on good terms with the forest and its potential. Hunting is thus not a matter of killing, but of sharing in the forest, which means moving in the forest. There is a built-in risk, however, that the darkness and wildness of the forest may cause a person to get lost. The intrinsic character of the forest invites one to lose

one's way, especially if one encounters the forest in a particular mood (Pahuus 1994).²

A typology akin to that undertaken by Ella Johansson can be found in the work of Bertrand Hell, who has studied perceptions of hunting rights in Southern Europe and Central Europe. He too thematizes the simultaneously reverent and condemnatory notion that hunting can enter one's blood. This idea is likewise connected to the fear that the hunter will become wild because of his close contact with the "black blood" of the quarry (Hell 1996:208). This fear is not as pronounced in Central Europe, where hunting has historically been more regulated and organized than in Southern Europe, where people, as in Scandinavia, hunt because they feel they have a perfect right to do so. Here too it is more a matter of "collecting" the fruits of the forest and the wilderness, but as in the Nordic outlands, here too the free and uncivilized right to hunt is accompanied by a corresponding respect and fear about being struck by "hunting fever". This risk is not so great for those who hunt in groups and hunting parties, as it is for the sole hunter or poacher, who lives and moves alone in the forest. The smaller the collective, the greater the freedom – and the danger of becoming one with or at least identified with the wild animals of the forest (Hell 1996: 210).

That this danger of "hunting fever" exists at all is due to the link with yet another *longue durée* idea, namely, that the hunted animals have different degrees of warm-bloodedness. Red deer, roe deer, and wild boar are the "warmest" and at the same time the animals that gave off the strongest smell. Especially the offal from such animals can provoke fever and wildness, whereas the animals' extremities, such as the haunch or

the hindquarter, which are further removed from the animal's "core", are not feared to the same extent. Such milder and moderately warm meat can therefore be considered acceptable food, which can even be given a gastronomic place of honour.

The classifications of game do not end here, for the warm-blooded animals can be further classified. The folk taxonomy divides game into "red meat", for example, from deer, "black meat" from wolf and wild boar, and "stinking meat", for example, from fox, marten, and weasel. The last type of meat is the worst. The idea that it stinks may have some factual basis in the smells secreted by the animals, but it is just as much a symbolic phenomenon. Their meat is regarded as too "black", since their weakly developed digestive system leaves them unable to digest the blood of the other animals they eat. Wild blood thus accumulates in them.

In this connection it is not without interest to note that the movement for the prevention of cruelty of animals which won victories in England in the nineteenth century, resulting in the prohibition of cock fighting and bull baiting, did nothing to protect the fox (Kayser Nielsen 1992: 302ff.). It continued to be hunted without mercy, as it could be compared with a sly thief coming in the night, so the battle against it also had a moral vein. The fox had to be eliminated (Thomas 1984:163). Squirrel meat, on the other hand, is all right, for the squirrel, although it is wild and lives in the forest, is not a beast of prey. Squirrel meat was eaten in certain parts of Finland (Talve 1997:112), just as bear has been eaten in Russia and the Caucasus.

Meat from wild animals is eaten by solitary, wild, passionate hunters who live

close to nature. In their “fever” they are attracted by the dark, warm, heavy meat of game animals. They consume meat which agrees with their nature. But this kind of meat does not attract people who do not hunt, that is, the peaceful village farmers, who prefer lighter, brighter meat, especially from castrated domesticated animals (Hell 1996:214). Correspondingly, it is considered both dangerous and immoral to serve “warm” and bloody meat to women, since they are unable to resist the inner force it contains (Hell 1996:210). If not before, now it becomes evident that the fear of “black, warm meat” and its consumption among the hunters and poachers of the margins is in reality a matter of the farming community’s internal efforts at civilizing and mental control. As we have seen so often, nature here is coloured by culture.

The Hunt, the Meat, and the Fear of Nature

Hunting is thus ultimately a ritual re-enactment of the fear of uncontrolled natural forces inside and outside people, which have the power to knock us over. In the well-organized, collective, and civilized hunting teams of village farmers or in the aristocrats’ elegant and distinguished hunting parties, it is possible to keep a cool head for the brief duration of the hunt, but it is different for those who mix with the wild animals of the forest every day. A poacher cannot keep a cool head, but he has a sense of the dangerous and untamed: fox, bear, wolf; in other words, he is after wild animals that eat other wild animals, whereas farmers hunt hare, pheasant, and so on. For that reason the poacher is so fascinating in his duality of wild strength and damnation. He incarnates the wild nature that we both

fear and admire. As Simon Schama (1995: 14) writes, the myths about nature and its whims continue to live, exerting an influence that we do not normally notice. They have never wholly disappeared from our culture. We may speak of cultural heritage and tradition.

It is here we finally come close to pinning down the relationship between meat, taboo, and cultural heritage. The cultural history of hunting in Western Europe over the last few hundred years tells us that the meat we eat must be culturally edible, and to be edible it must match our civilized, that is to say, distanced relationship to nature: not too much and not too little nature, but still nature and hence something other than ourselves. This nature-meat must be “natural”, that is, harmonized: it may not include our pets, which are not nature; nor should it be too wild, too pure nature, for then we ourselves become savages – one would become like the poacher, a slave to hunting, instead of being the master of the hunt. In the form of a ritual re-enactment, hunting thus thematizes a culturally inherited duality as regards nature: giving oneself up to the whims of nature, but simultaneously having control over oneself and the situation. This inherited duality is part of our shared memory; a memory that is not explicitly thematized as in history books and monuments, but as traces and actions that we follow without thinking very closely about it.

Heritage by Doing

Hunting is thus an example illustrating that cultural heritage is something that happens and takes place. Hunting makes it obvious

that cultural heritage is an activity. This means that hunting and meat also carry memories – and hence continuity. We know this well: for instance, from Proust’s madeleine cake, the smell of which led him to search for lost times. This dimension of elements of tradition, that they are not just constructions but also bearers of memory, is discussed by Paul Connerton in his learned study *How Societies Remember*. The point of the book is that societies remember, not only by inscribing – in the concrete sense of writing down – but also through the body, for example, in tastes and gestures. His argument is that memory is not just an individual but also a collective phenomenon which takes place via what he calls “incorporating practice”, that is, corporeality (Connerton 1996:72ff.).

This bodily memory is part of a larger bodily knowledge and cognition by doing, which is also expressed in other areas. It can happen, for example, in the form of learning a special national identity which is not characterized by manifest symbols and official community, instead being experience-based by being associated with a special practice in nature and hence, basically, open and accessible to everyone (Kayser Nielsen 1997b). In concrete terms it takes place by learning a landscape and making it one’s own by moving in it. In this way a landscape becomes not just a space or a place, but ultimately a home (Kayser Nielsen 1999). Here, the body does not tend to seek a state of rest; rather it is the body’s capacity for ex-istence, i.e. transgression of mere standing, state and stance, which, in moving, enables the body to display potentiality and openness towards its surroundings. This ex-static and open body is symbiotic and relational. It does not

occupy space, but rather inhabits space, turning it into place – and home. This implies an identity elaborated through actions, involvement and experiences much more than being the outer expression of changeless essence and rigid immutability.

This distinction between the state of being and belonging – as part of a cultural heritage – is elaborated in Ruben Oliven’s book *Tradition Matters: Modern Gaúcho Identity in Brazil* (1996), in a portrait of the cultural heritage of the gaúcho culture in Rio Grande do Sul in southern Brazil. Here it is striking that this cultural heritage is sustained by movement and perception such as music festivals, maté drinking, horse riding, dancing etc. Such activities are not mirrors of an identity reflecting the region of Rio Grande do Sul as home; rather they are activities creating a relational context and community of meaning to be part of, by means of common bodily actions and experiences, where you are both an active or originating force and a reactive and responding force – as in Nordic hunting with its cultural heritage of common actions and common meaning.

Putting Hunting in Cultural Historical Perspective

Hunting, as part of our Nordic cultural heritage, is about why and how we use both taboo and ritual to organize our cultural relationship to nature in a broad sense. In hunting we relate to our heritage which says that food and meat are not just nutrition but also a cultural phenomenon hedged with symbolic codes and imperceptibly accepted and implicit meanings, the origin of which seems to go very far back. In this case tabooing plays an important role as part of a culturally organized view of meat

and nature.

At the same time, the features in the cultural history of hunting outlined above show that the kind of latent semantic units that tacitly give meaning to our food are not uncontested by social history. We do not simply inherit from the society around us; the cultural heritage is in fact constantly challenged and disputed. Our view of nature is heavily influenced by the way we use arable land and forest for purposes of production. This also applies to the part of our cultural heritage that is expressed as practice, in other words, heritage by doing. Once again we find confirmation that cultural analysis without social history is pointless, blind to change and historically conditioned conflicts. For hunting too, cultural analysis should mean analysing everyday phenomena in order to expose deeper patterns of culture which tell us something about fundamental societal values and conflicts.

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Notes

- 1 One of the most famous of the Finnish tangos (*Uralin pihlaja*) is about the fear of being swallowed by the forest. The beloved one has been transformed into a rowan tree and is therefore unattainable. The fact that the scene has to be set in the distant Urals underlines how painfully present the risk is in the folk conceptual world.
- 2 This state has been described with great in-

sight in a literary form by another Nordic writer, Sari Malkamäki from Finland, who writes about her leading character Maisa that she loved her trees (outside her home) “without knowing their names and without knowing how many there were of them”. When she closed her eyes she could feel the sap pulsating under the bark. One fine day the local residents’ association decides that the trees should be felled because they block out too much light in the gardens. Maisa protests in vain and has to live with a new view from her kitchen window. “You could see so far now that it made your eyes sore” (Malkamäki 1998).

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