

Cheap Meat: Flap Food Nations in the Pacific Islands.* Deborah Gewertz and Frederick Errington. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010. 213 pp.

Reviewed by David E. Sutton

If commodity fetishism involves the forgetting of the labor process that went into the making of commodities, one antidote is to “track the object,” to reveal the processes by which that shiny, new, desirable, thing was produced—often under conditions of exploitation—in order to challenge the capitalist market system of valuing objects by their price or by the so-called “laws of supply and demand.” Thus a number of recent studies in the anthropology of food and of material culture more generally have set out to do exactly that, taking us on the “tomato trail” of underpaid workers and pesticide use and supermarket shopping, or revealing the machinations and contradictions of “fair trade” coffee. In *Cheap Meat*, long-time ethnographers of Papua New Guinea offer to take us on a similar trail, but for a product very different from the typical commodity fetish. Lamb and mutton flaps, the fatty sheep bellies produced in Australia and New Zealand, and sold in Papua New Guinea and the Pacific Islands do not have the “aura” of a shiny new commodity and do not particularly hide the conditions of their production, indeed they seem to shout out that they are slaughtered meat. Although desired by some as a cheap and delicious source of calories in communities where food is scarce, they are scorned by others as a food barely fit for dogs, the putative cause of a host of obesity-related diseases, a product commonly referred to as being “dumped” on unsuspecting consumers in the poorer regions of the Pacific. Gewertz and Errington propose to follow the stories of production, exchange, and consumption of this very different sort of commodity, one that reveals more about contemporary cultural politics and the dilemmas and disappointments of a “modernization” that did not quite arrive. While not commodity fetishes, they did serve as “totems”—for flap-eaters and flap-refusers this cheap meat seemed to symbolize the enduring differences between the first and third-world.

To track the flap about flaps, Gewertz and Errington take us to a number of key sites. First the slaughterhouse floor, where technology has allowed a move away from the production of whole carcasses to particular cuts—expensive and cheap—that can then be sent to different markets. They also describe some of the use of migrant labor under more and less exploitative conditions. From there we enter the world of meat traders, where they give a largely sympathetic portrait of these men as self-described risk-takers and cultural brokers trying to make sure that each part of the lamb finds its appropriate buyer. The most ethnographically detailed section of the book describes the reception of flaps in Papua New Guinea (PNG), where we get a sense of the relationship of these meat products to local foodways—how they fit into the rest of the diet, and what other meats they compete with. The many mixed feelings expressed by Papua New Guineans about these foods are also explored. Finally, they take us to Fiji and Tonga where the official reception of flaps has been more critical, indeed, they were banned in Fiji in 2000. Gewertz and Errington explore questions of public health and how it is to be administered, and the way that the flaps seem to be a scapegoat for larger problems of contemporary life. A final chapter discusses the similarities and differences between flaps and Big Macs, two extremely calorie-rich and fatty products with very different cultural profiles and associations.

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The authors do a good job in highlighting some of the different cultural and economic circumstances of PNG and the Pacific Islands that make for very different discourses and use of flaps. In PNG, where many people get less than the target 2000 daily calories, concern over health effects of flaps is outweighed by the fact that they are cheap and available, and have ripple effects in the local economy where they are often sold at outdoor markets as snacks: “what would poor people do to earn money; what would poor people do for food?” (p. 95). Gewertz and Errington also explore the relationship of flaps to the more traditional practices of pig raising and exchange. They note that, despite their cheapness, flaps have not replaced pigs. Rather in urban contexts, flaps seem to fit well with more “flexible” relationships, “foster[ing] relationships of goodwill between colleagues, teammates and neighbors who are well-disposed but have few long-term commitments to one another” (p. 107). But while many people accept and even enjoy flaps, they remain a constant reminder that despite earlier optimism over the prospects of development, PNG remains a place where “they have to settle for (or indeed, often actively accept) what other people do not want” (p. 95). In Fiji and Tonga by contrast flaps enter debates about overeating and lifestyle choices, where neoliberal discourse of personal responsibility seems to be increasingly pervasive. Despite this, a government ban on flaps in Fiji was received by and largely positively by the population, which took it as showing government concern for its citizens. Flaps neither had the appeal of the Western (like KFC), nor were they part of traditional cultural practices (like the brined brisket used as a feast food in Tonga), and thus in the Pacific flaps were left to “become the repository not only of health concerns but also of postcolonial anxieties” (p. 146).

One of the strengths of this book is Gewertz and Errington’s methodological reflexivity. They are constantly letting the reader in on choices and decisions about how to do an object-focused ethnography, where one should follow the object and where they had to cut off the trail. Thus this book would work well in food and nutrition classes. Its clear writing will be appreciated by students, as will the way that the authors bring their ethnography back to debates in the U.S., as they discuss recent popular works by Michael Pollan, Eric Schlosser and Morgan Spurlock. I leave the last word on flaps to the authors: “As fatty flesh that some relish and others feed to their dogs...flaps invite a critical scrutiny. They encourage many Pacific Islanders to think critically about the broader relationships that distinguish the eschewers from the eaters, the First World from the Third, the white from the brown. Because flaps reveal such relationships within a global life process, they resist commercial efforts to re-submerge them into the anonymity of circulating commodities, subject to the supply and demand of consumer choice—to make them just another meat that someone will eat when the price is right. Because no one grows a sheep for its flaps, flaps make a lot happen” (p. 150).

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