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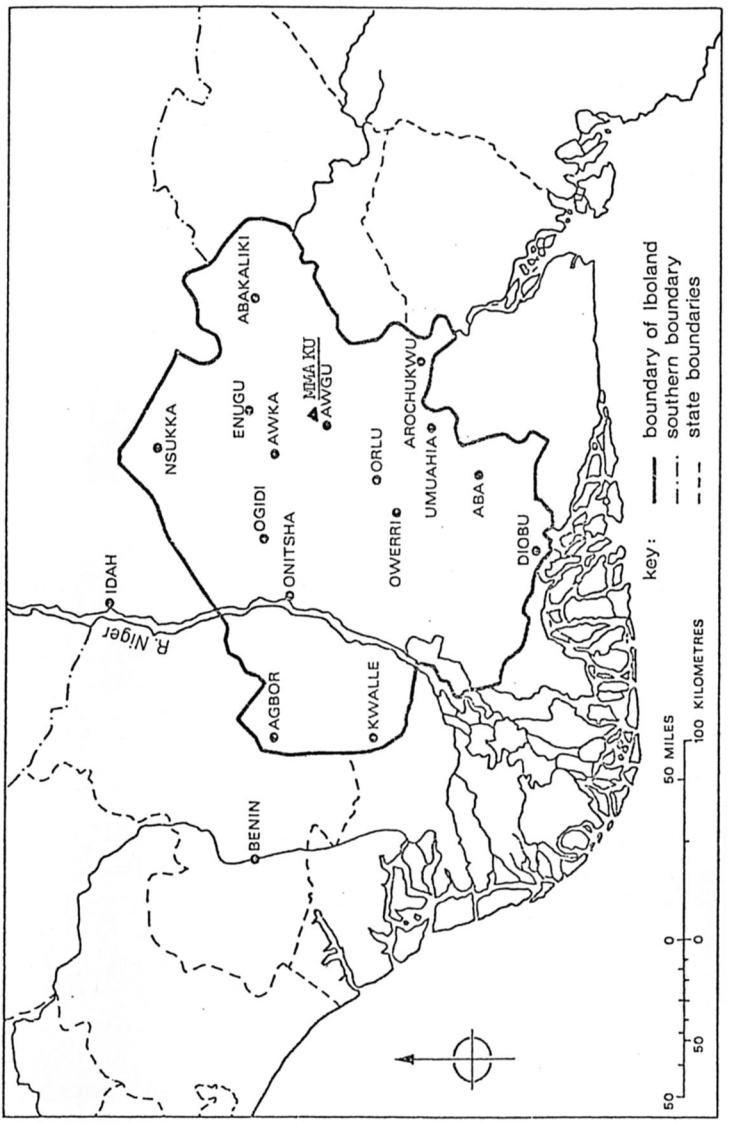
RITUALS OF SOLIDARITY IN AN IGBO VILLAGE: A SYMBOLIC ANALYSIS OF MEAT SHARING PRACTICES AMONG THE MMAKU IGBO

Mark Anikpo

This study focuses on the use of symbolic rituals associated with the sharing of meat to re-enact Kinship and affinal bonds. The setting is Mmaku, an Igbo village in what is presently the Anambra State of Nigeria. In a general sense, Mmaku possesses all the cultural characteristics which earlier writers had attributed to Igbo Society (see Meek 1937, Uchendu 1965). Suffice it to mention here that Mmaku belongs to that group of African societies which Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940) referred to as stateless societies. There are no formal bureaucratic structures as in the centralised monarchical societies to provide an organising principle of group solidarity. This vacuum creates room for the involvement of informal structures affecting kinship and marriage, power and authority, law and morality and status hierarchies. The articulation of these informal processes form a complex cluster of symbolic rituals which the villagers carry out perfunctorily. To the anthropologist however they pose problems of meaningful interpretation. That is to say, one must go beyond the overt description or narrative of the ritual processes, to the interpretation of their symbolic meaning.

The problems involved in meaningful interpretation of symbols have been recognised by earlier writers. Dan Sperber (1975) makes reference to Victor Turner's (1967:51) classification of 'meaning' with regard to symbols. Turner distinguishes between three levels or fields of meaning.



MAP 2. *SOUTH-EASTERN NIGERIA: showing Iboland and the location of Awka*

1. the 'exegetical meaning', operating at the level of local commentary.
2. The 'operational meaning' which is equivalent to its use and the effective qualities linked to that use - aggressive, sad, penitent, joyful, derisive etc.
3. The 'positional meaning' which relates to the place of the symbol in the network of other symbolic relationships that constitute the social structure.[1]

This exposition does not completely solve the semiological difficulties involved in symbolic interpretations. Sperber notes that:

> There is no doubt that symbolic phenomena are paired to commentaries, to proper uses, to other symbolic phenomena, as Turner has noted. Nor is there any doubt that symbolic phenomena are interpreted. The problem is to know whether the phenomena paired to symbols constitute interpretations of them, and whether the interpretations of symbols are regularly paired to them.

Sperber argues basically that, although symbols may symbolise something, yet, what exactly they symbolise are not clear and it will be misleading to assume that any symbol has an absolute meaning like the signals of a code. Rather, the real meaning of any symbols is hidden and those interpretations given to them by ethnographers do not necessarily represent their meanings.

We have referred to Dan Sperber not because we believe that symbols do not have exact meanings (hidden or not), but because we think he highlights a significant methodological problem in the study of symbols and symbolism. As most other researchers had pointed out, ethnographers are conversant with situations in which those who use the symbols cannot interpret what the symbolic objects or acts mean. To such people, "the use of the symbols is customary" and "we are doing it the way our ancestors did it". In such cases ethnographers have tended to rely, correctly or incorrectly, on associational or secondary meanings, that is, the interpretation of symbols by what they resemble or signify. This type of exercise is obviously subject to errors. However, the study of symbols and symbolism need not be anchored at the level of interpreting the operational meaning of the symbols. It will be more fruitful in such studies to extend the interpretation of the 'positional meaning' which provides a picture of why the symbol exists. In other words, apart from asking the question, 'what does the symbol mean'? one would also ask 'why does it exist'. The information presented below aims at answering both questions for our specific symbolic material.

The major limitation to this analysis is the absence in the libraries of most African Universities of such works as Levi-Strauss's Pensee Sauvage

(1962) which contains interesting ideas on the symbolism of sacrificial meat.

The Mmaku Data

As already indicated, kin group and affinal ties are vital to the stability of Mmaku society. These ties are consistently reinforced through various traditional ceremonies. Some of these ceremonies are fast disappearing. A typical example of such ceremonies in Mmaku are the rituals of meat sharing on various occasions. The elders, as usual, have started to lament the eclipse of a long-standing custom. The lament in this case is not that they are being deprived of much needed meat. They are afraid that the bonds of kinship which hold the society together are thinning out. In various ways, they try to remind the younger generation that the 'passing of traditional society' will spell doom on everyone. The passing custom for which they are so upset involves an elaborate cluster of symbolic objects (animals) and acts (meat sharing) which many people know about but which nobody has any rational interpretation for. We attempt here to describe these ceremonial rituals, offer interpretations of them and explain their relevance to the stability of Mmaku society.

It must be noted that the killing and sharing of these animals operate at the level of the umunna. The Igbo word umunna refers to a kinship group (patrilineal). It will be used in this analysis to represent a minimal lineage, that is the smallest kinship unit that can occupy a politically autonomous territory. In the order of size, the Igbo kinship groupings are as follows:

CLAN (maximal lineage)	.....	collection of 'towns'
TOWN (major lineage)	.....	collection of villages
VILLAGE (minor lineage)	.....	collection of umunna
UMUNNA (minimal lineage)	.....	collection of extended families

1. Killing and Sharing of Chicken ('Igbu-Okuko'):

The people of Mmaku have three major ceremonial occasions, apart from

personal consumption, for which the killing of chicken is necessary. The sharing of the chicken meat differs on all these occasions. In general, however, the standard pattern of sharing is -

the gizzard (nkpuluma) liver leg (kpolokpolo) tail end (eke)	belong to the father or oldest male;
the pelvic region	to the mother;
the head	to the youngest child.

Other parts of the chicken are shared arbitrarily.

It is considered a serious breach of peace to deprive anybody of his or her ascribed portion of the chicken meat. Serious family conflicts often arise as a result of such deprivations. When there is an infringement, the aggrieved person registers his protest by refusing to participate in all family group activities. The withdrawal naturally attracts the attention of other members of the family. A peace committee is formed immediately to resolve the conflict. As long as it is established that the complainant was deprived of his legitimate share of the meat, the settlement is straightforward but not as easy as the offence. The offender may have to pay the offended party one full chicken, a gallon of palm wine and some kola nuts.

A person may be deprived of his share of the meat in ignorance. The consequence will still be the same. Consider, for instance, the following case of two Igbo families in the U.S.A. Chike and Chris are brothers. Chike is the younger brother but more prosperous. Both are married to Igbo women. Chike's family hosted a dinner party for Chris and his family. The meal of rice and chicken stew contained the gizzards of the chicken. Chike's wife, feeling that the gizzard belongs to the man of the house, spooned out the gizzards and placed them on her husband's plate. Although Chris did not bother about his younger brother eating the chicken gizzard, his wife took a very serious objection to it. Her insistence that an Igbo custom must be observed in far away U.S.A. was irritating to Chike's wife. The incident sparked off a disagreement between the two women and the relationship between the two families began to deteriorate. The story was heard by the parents and relatives of Chike and Chris in Nigeria. A very interesting thing happened. Chike had made an outstanding invitation to his parents to visit the U.S. but his father had consistently refused to undertake such a journey. As soon as the old man heard the story of the gizzard incident Chike's father accepted the invitation and travelled to the U.S. to handle the situation himself.

The question one asks is why should the issue of who eats the gizzard of a chicken generate so much friction? Put differently, what is the essence

of tagging chicken parts for particular individuals? It is obvious that the issue at stake is covertly couched in meat parts. As Cohen has argued, symbols in this way represent for the individual "fundamental mechanisms for the development of selfhood and for tackling the perennial problems of human existence..." [2] The individual expressions are projected into group relationships affecting kinship systems, power and authority relationships and indeed the overall stability of the social structure.

In the Igbo socio-cultural system, the eldest male in the group sharing chicken meat (or any other meat as we shall see later) is given the gizzard (heart, in other animals), liver, tail-end (eke) and the leg because a symbolic association is made of these parts with life sustenance and ritual power. The heart (of no meat value in the chicken) and the liver are considered the most important organs in the body. Similarly, the father of the family (usually the eldest male), being the breadwinner, represents the life of the family group. The tail-end (eke) of the chicken is also reserved for the father of the family because he is the symbol of ritual power (and authority) in the family. The eke is similarly associated with ritual power. The leg as a preserve of the father depicts the father as like the leg. As the animal's body rests on the leg, the father too is the pillar or support on which the family rests. One may argue that this is a secondary level interpretation which reduces symbols to mere signs (see Cohen 1974:24). But it also explains the connection between the pelvis and the woman. The traditional Igbo conception of the woman is of a succulent female being, typified in the well developed hip region with all the distinctive female organs of the body. Similarly one may explain giving the chicken head to the youngest member of the family as a sign that the little child is not of much social worth just as the chicken head is generally considered as of little meat value.

These secondary explanations of symbolic representations constitute part of the overall symbolic complex whose exact or primary meaning is the subject of so much controversy. In order to explore further the symbolic configurations associated with meat sharing one must look again at their separate implications.

It was indicated earlier that apart from the generalised pattern of sharing meat, variations could occur in accordance with the particular ceremony for which the chicken is killed. For instance, chicken (a hen) is usually killed in a 'rite of separation'. Thus, when a married woman dies, a hen is killed and sent through a small child, to the natal home of the woman to inform her relatives about the tragedy. This chicken is eventually given

to the 'go-between' (ihuta) of the marriage.[3] He or she is entitled to consume all the parts of the chicken if he/she so desires.

Another ceremonial ritual during which chicken is killed is a typical 'rite of incorporation'. It is a thanksgiving ritual (iba no ụnọ) carried out after the 10th native week of the birth of a male child. For the ceremony, a cock is killed. One thigh (ọlọ) is given to the other women (ndi nwunye di) married into the same household (umunna). The neck (onu) of the chicken is given to the mother's best friend (onye ukechi) from among these other married women. The remaining parts of the chicken belong entirely to the mother of the new baby. The customary requirement that the mother of the new baby boy gives out the ọlọ and onu to other women married into that umunna is an obligatory enactment of the friendship and cooperation expected of such women. This is part of the contribution to the maintenance of a stable group life.

The third ceremonial ritual that may demand the killing of a chicken is demanded by the ancestral cult (alusi) in accordance with the directives of the traditional medicine man (dibia). Mmaku people refer to it as "aja lwa madu" literally meaning 'to whom a sacrifice is demanded'. The peculiar feature of this ritual is that the chicken must be slaughtered by another dibia or the eldest male of the umunna representing the family's ritual authority. The person who kills the chicken takes one thigh (utaku), the neck, the gizzard and the tail-end (eke). The heart is shared like kola nut to all those present at the sacrifice. The supplicant receives one thigh and one wing (aka okuku) cut out close from the body. The other wing region is sent to the supplicant's paternal kin (umunna).

The new dimension here is the sharing of the wing region (hand, in other animals). The portion given to the supplicant is a matter of ownership. As we shall explain later, the giving of chicken wing or animal hand to a person's close kin or umunna is a significant symbolic action in Mmaku. Secondly, it is supposed to signify the show of affection and kinship which is usually expressed through handshake. Beyond that, it symbolises, as Fortes (1945, 1949) would say, "the general idiom articulating economic, jural, political, moral and ritual relations,"[4] among close kin.

One other ceremonial occasion that demands the killing of chicken in Mmaku is when a new baby is to be brought, for the first time, into the home of the grandfather or grandmother. The sharing of the chicken meat follows the normal pattern described above.

2. 'Igbu Ewu' (Goat Killing)

When a Mmaku family kills a goat specifically for family food requirements, those fraternal exchanges that dramatise a group's solidarity are usually not fully displayed. The sharing of the goat meat in the household however, follows certain normative patterns to which strong sentiments are attached, as in the more ritualised occasions of goat killing. Custom demands, that the father or the eldest male be given the heart. This again symbolises the position of the father as the 'nerve' centre of the family existence. The head is reserved for the little children. The informants during the survey for this study found no explanation for children receiving the head of the goat. They were of the opinion that the head was left for the children mainly because it had little meat value. The jaw and tongue are usually removed, and the two ears are cut out and shared among all those with kinship links in the household. In Mmaku, this is called Nti nwanne echi-echi. This is an idiomatic expression for the solidarity of the kin-group. Literally, it means that "brothers' ears are always open" (to the yearnings or calls of one another).

When Mmaku people talk about Igbu-ewu as a ceremonial ritual, they refer mainly to a marriage obligation. After some years of marriage, especially when a child or two have arrived, a man is expected to kill a goat on behalf of his wife. The goat is actually for the mother-in-law (or grandmother-in-law if still alive) but offered in the name of the wife. The ceremony is therefore called iye nne i.e. 'mother's own'. This rather than with a show of wealth as in pig and cow killing, is one way in which the man publicly expresses his satisfaction with the woman he has married.

The sharing of the goat meat involves a cluster of symbolic acts the meaning of which will be explained below. In principle, all the goat meat belongs to the mother - or grandmother-in-law. She is however, supposed to share it with her immediate brothers and sisters. She sends one hand of the goat meat to her most senior brother or sister. If the woman is the most senior among her brothers and sisters, she gives the one hand of the meat to all her brothers and sisters. The other hand and one leg (including the thigh region) belongs to her (i.e. the particular mother-in-law). The remaining leg goes to her maternal aunts and uncles. The hands and legs of the animal are usually cut out in such a way that only the ribs, parts of the back bone and the entrails are left afterwards. The sharing of these parts are at the discretion of the mother-in-law.

A similar igbu-ewu ceremony in Mmaku is called igbufu iye mmee literally, "pouring out blood". The expression is metaphorical, referring to the ability of a man to grapple successfully with difficulties. When a person is visibly a failure he may be cynically told in a joke or a satirical song that he has never engaged in igbufu iye mmee. The implication is that he should watch his step because the people are not happy with his performances.

When such an accusation comes from one's in-laws, as may happen, the further implication is that the man does not show gratitude for the wife given to him. This is especially resented by his in-laws when the woman has had many children for the man. Given this implication, the igbu ewu ceremony of igbufu iye mmee is carried out by a man for his wife, more to commend the wife than to show prosperity. The goat is given to the wife's father (if alive) or to her paternal kin. The goat meat belongs theoretically to the wife's father although he is required by custom to share it with other relatives. He is entitled to one half of the goat plus the heart and the head intact. The other half is given to members of his minimal agnatic lineage (umunna). All the families within the umunna must receive a share or serious lineage conflict could result. If the wife's father is not alive, the father substitute (uncle, senior brother, etc.) represents the father and receives the father's share.

Given the reasoning explained above, whenever a part of meat containing the leg and thigh region is received by a group, the most senior male (or female if the group is made up only of women) is given the leg from the knee downwards, known in Mmaku as kpolokpolo.

Note that 'goat killing' ceremonies are not really mandatory. They are desirable. By contrast pig and cow killing ceremonies are mandatory and must occur in that order. A cow will not be accepted unless a pig has been previously killed.

3. "Igbu Ezi" (Pig killing)

The killing of a pig solely for food is not common in Mmaku. For whatever reasons pig-keeping is not a popular occupation among Mmaku people. In most cases, pigs are killed for rituals, particularly as an extension of marriage ceremonial. A man offers a pig to the family of his wife in order to demonstrate his affection and satisfaction with her.

The method of meat distribution is a bit more complicated than those described earlier. One thigh (utaku) of the meat is given to members of the wife's mother's extended family minus her full brothers and sisters. These

immediate brothers and sisters, known as ndi elaa'nu (i.e. people of the same breast or people who were nurtured by the same mother) are a special group. They receive the hand, the liver, intestines and the undercover meat cut from the next to the breast. The other hand and the heart are given to the wife's father. The remaining thigh is given to the wife's mother or grandmother (if still alive). The portion given to the wife's mother is again split into two. One half is given to the ndi nwunyedi i.e. the other women married into that umunna. This is on condition that the mother is on friendly terms with them. Otherwise she reserves the right to use her portion of the meat as she pleases. Generally however, she gives it to them otherwise part of the significance of the ceremony will be lost. This significance, as we are trying to show, rests on the potential of the meat-sharing rituals to dramatise and in fact reinforce the solidarity of kinship and affinal groups. The sentiments shared during these distribution ceremonies constitute powerful integrative forces. Usually, even if temporarily, they evoke fraternal feelings. As Onigu Otito (1977) put it "...symbols and their attendant sentiments are powerful instruments of persuasion...as well as maintaining group integrity and stability."[5] The obligations imposed on the recipients of the meat shares, force the kin-group members into reciprocal interdependence. In the ensuing euphoria, outstanding ill-feelings and conflicts disappear. Individuals in dispute may permanently reconcile their differences and thus reinforce the qualitative character of the group's solidarity. This situation is most apparent in the social drama that accompanies the igbu efi ritual described below.

4. "Igbu Efi" (Cow Killing)

This is the epitome of ritual symbolism in Mmaku. It incorporates myth, politics and economics into "cultural metaphors which containerize values and beliefs and serve as effective and cognitive coordinates of social action"[6] (Geertz, 1964, Levi Strauss, 1962). What fascinates the observer is not only the remarkable identification parade that goes on in the sharing exercise, but also the dramatisation of symbolic conflict that goes on while the master butcher is dexterously but deviously (always trying to cut in more meat into any portion he will get a share from) slicing off the different shares. While the butcher is cleverly trying to favour or disfavour some persons or groups, the particular individuals or representatives are smarting for fights with him. The seemingly hot exchanges of words, the pugnacious displays of bad temper and the butcher's contemptuous indifference are all institutionalised expressions of joyful expectation, the method notwithstanding. To the Mmaku people, the absence of such 'playful fantasies' dampens the

glamour of the occasion.

The cow may be killed for any of the following reasons:-

a) "Efi-izu" (cow for the titled): for the acquisition of a traditional title by men and women.

b) "Efi ja-jaa" (cow for merriment): by a man for his wife.

c) "Efi-onyu elaa" (cow to glorify mother's breast milk); by a man or a woman for his or her mother in appreciation for all her childhood care.

d) "Efi-ji" (cow for yam): by a successful farmer to commemorate years of consistent good yam harvest.

e) "Efi-akwa" (cow for funeral): by anybody to celebrate a parent's funeral.

Of all these ceremonial occasions, only the second, Efi ja-jaa will be discussed in detail because it is the most comprehensive and glamorous. Apart from the first, Efi izu and the last, Efiakwa it encompasses most of the symbolic drama of the meat sharing which occurs on the other two occasions.

Efi-izu (cow for the titled) for instance is a special occasion for titled men. The title in question is the Ogbu-efi (cow-killer) which confers honorific privileges and social status to such people. It is usually done at the minimal lineage or umunna level and only those with the Ogbu-efi title share in the cow meat except that one hand of the cow (cut from the shoulder) and an assemblage of selected tiny meat parts known as mbombo are specially given to the closest extended family group within the same umunna. They are known as ndi Eke-Ekekwata or the 'inner circle'. The Okpala (eldest male of the umunna) gets his bonus of the heart. The testes (akulu) are given to the father of the man who offered the cow. The daughters of the umunna known as umuada are given the pelvic region of the cow out of which the eldest of them takes half. The only other part of the cow meat that is given to somebody outside the titled group is the large stomach (isi-afo). It is given to the woman praise singer (ony-evu). She also gets part of the cow skin taken from two sides of the cow. (This is part of the mbombo).

The killing of efi-akwa (cow for funerals) is demanded by custom only when a person's father or mother did not perform the efi-izu title ceremony. The purpose is therefore the same but postumously and the sharing is as described above.

In both cases, the person who is offering the cow takes the head and the ribs. He is also given two arbitrarily cut out pieces of meat of different sizes called isi-ndu ukwu and isi-ndu nta. The nearest English equivalent of the Mmaku word, isi-ndu is 'bonus'. The suffixes 'ukwu' and 'nta' mean 'big' and 'small'. The upper and lower jaws of the cow is a popular set of isi-ndu

meat. However, the 'cow killer' does not take them himself. He is supposed to give them to his best friend.

The Ritual of "Efi ja-jaa" (cow for merriment)

This ceremony galvanises the kinship groups into a symbolic fanfare glorifying its corporateness. It is an occasion which brings out the women in a proud display of colourful pageantry, and shows that the killing of a cow by a man for his wife is also a display of wealth. This display is demanded by custom, but because it is so expensive a man and his in-laws make the decision to embark on it collectively.

As soon as a man begins to think of killing this cow for his wife, he gives the hint, usually in a metaphorical language accompanied by two gallons of wine, to his father-in-law or a representative. The in-laws must give their consent before any such action and they will be involved in the exercise from start to finish. When the consent is given, a relative of the wife is detailed to ensure that an appropriate cow is bought. He joins physically in the team that goes to the distant cow market to select the cow.

When the cow is brought to the village before ever the cow is actually slaughtered, the celebrations start. The mother-in-law or anybody acting for her in cooperation with the wife's other relatives cook a lot of food including cassava foufou, red beans (asaja) and yams. A bag of salt, a tin of oil, a large lump of the local 'cake' (eho), coconuts etc. are taken from the in-laws' house to the house of the man offering the cow. Similar food items are also prepared by relatives of the man. The celebrations thus start with a feast involving the extended families (umunna) of both the man and his wife.

Again before the cow is killed, the wife for whose honour the ceremony is taking place, pays a special visit to her natal home to perform a special appreciation dance known as itu ose. A lot of money is exchanged between the woman and her relatives on this visit. Depending on how wealthy they are, the dance drama may be performed twice. On the first occasion the wife goes home accompanied by her ndi aka okuku, that is, those other married women in her husband's umunna with whom she would normally share the hand of any animal killed. On the second occasion she goes alone. Each time she dances, people offer her gifts of money in appreciation. She also receives donations of yam and cocoyam.

Sharing of the Cow Meat

The cow is butchered by relatives of the wife at the house of her husband. In attendance at the sharing are two sets of umuada (daughters of the soil) from the man's and woman's respective lineage.

The cow is split into two halves except for the head which is cut out and given to the man who offered the cow. One half of the meat is given to relatives of the man and one half to the relatives of the woman. Since the cow is split into two halves it means that the pelvic region is shared between the two sets of umuada. This, it will be remembered, is in contrast to the sharing of the efi-izu cow in which the entire pelvic region of the cow is given only to the umuada of the man's lineage.

Distribution of the Share of the Woman's Relations

From their own half of the cow meat, the woman's father or guardian takes the thigh (utaku) - from the knee upwards. The rest is shared arbitrarily among members of the woman's umunna (paternal kin).

Distribution of the Share of the Man's Relations:

The thigh is given to all the women married into the man's umunna. The rest is shared arbitrarily by the man's relatives.

It needs to be pointed out that in the sharing of the efi-izu, the maternal kin get practically nothing, but the maternal relations of the man's father are given something.

It will be noticed that these rituals of meat sharing are directly associated with marriage. They serve both as indicators and determinants of marriage stability. They therefore highlight the close link between the stability of marriages and that of the whole society. It may not be out of place to say that in Mmaku and indeed most other village communities, the key to a stable society lies in stable marriages.

Concluding Discussion:

The data presented above could be viewed from a variety of perspectives. We have tried to apply the symbolic analytical model in explaining a set of ceremonial rituals involving meat sharing because these rituals represent a set of cultural metaphors pointing at a hidden meaning far beyond the observable social drama.

The use of these symbolic objects and the application of the ritual drama reflects an underlying tendency towards the maintenance of a stable social order. In Mmaku community, the absence of formal structures of group organisation gives salience to kinship as the articulating principle of group life. Given the labour intensive nature of their predominantly agricultural pursuits, kinship ideologies enable the group to mobilise for cooperative group action. The need for this cooperation is so strong that the group's solidarity must be constantly re-enacted. Through symbolic activities like those described above the social structure coheres, endures and adapts to changes in the socio-cultural, political and economic systems. The place of

the symbolic features in this stabilising function needs to be properly identified by the anthropologist. He must seek the meaning 'stored' in the symbols (Geertz 1973:127). More intensive researches into meat sharing rituals at Mmaku could reveal the directive influence on the patterns of greeting among the people, the origin of the power structure in the village and the organic character of the village community and other similar village communities.

Notes

[1] Dan Sperber, Rethinking Symbolism, England, Cambridge University Press, 1975:15.

[2] Cohen, 1974:x.

[3] It is a rule in Mmaku marriage custom that in any marriage there must be a go-between or the match-maker who introduced the couple to each other. He plays a crucial role in the stability of the marriage and is always invited in disputes involving that marriage.

[4] Meyer Fortes, quoted in Cohen, op.cit. 1974.

[5] Onigu Otite, "Symbolism and Sentiments in Nigerian Politics" in The Nigerian Journal of Sociology and Anthropology, Vol.3 Sept. 1977, No.1. p.48.

[6] Clifford Geertz, "Ideology as a Cultural System", in D.Apter ed. Ideology and Discontent, New York, Free Press, 1964.

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FAMILY, FARM AND WIDER SOCIETY; THE FINNISH CASE[1]

R.G. Abrahams

As elsewhere in Finland, and indeed in many other countries, farming in North Karelia is predominantly a family affair. The running of a farm is, as it was 200 years ago, dependent typically upon the labour of the immediate farm family supplemented by cooperation between families. The present situation is, however, not so much a simple and direct continuation from the past as the result of complex processes of change in which industrialisation, large-scale state involvement, improved agricultural efficiency within the market economy, and major shifts in the size and structure of the rural population have all played an important part. Farmers and their families value the opportunity they possess to operate as relatively free economic agents, but their ability to do so has been and remains largely dependent upon forces and developments outside their control. Nonetheless, farming families do genuinely constitute a special and extremely adaptable form of socio-econonic unit in which normally sharply separated elements are inextricably conjoined.