CONFECTIONS, CONCOCTIONS AND CONCEPTIONS

This article derives from an incident which took place while I was doing fieldwork in the North East of England, investigating the structure and experience of childhood. An old lady of my acquaintance, remarking on the quality of the paint used by the National Coal Board on their properties, grumbled that it was 'all ket - rubbish' and that it would peel off in a few months. Before this I had only encountered the word 'ket' among children who used it as their term for sweets,[1] especially cheaper ones. This difference in use intrigued me, particularly when I remembered that sweets, from the adult perspective, are literally the rubbish which children eat between meals.

Further close attention to conversations revealed that 'ket', or 'kets', was used by adults as a classificatory noun to mean an assortment of useless articles and also as an adjective, 'ketty' meaning rubbishy or useless. Confirmation of this usage comes from Dobson (1974) who defines the word as rubbish. However, Cecil Geeson cites the original meaning as: 'something smelly, stinking, unhealthy or diseased' generally applicable to the 'carcasses of animals dying a natural death and dressed for market without being bled.' (1969:116)[2] The Opies (1959) suggest that many old dialect words which have died out in adult language are stored in the child's repertoire but the example of 'kets' casts doubt on an image of passive retention. In this case the semantic content is not stored, but instead undergoes a significant shift. A word which, in the adult world, refers to despised and inedible substances has been transformed; in the world of the child it refers to a revered sweet. In this article I shall explore the seemingly unrelated uses of the term 'kets' in the worlds of adults and children and shall attempt to reveal and explain an inherent and consistent logic in such uses.

To talk about sweets and rubbish inevitably involves discussing the relationship between the worlds of adults and children. I have argued elsewhere (James 1979) that the social world of children, whilst being separate in relation to the adult world, is nevertheless dependent on it. This dependence is not passive, however. Instead there is a creative process of interdependence: children construct their own ordered system of rules by reinterpreting the social models given to them by adults. It is through this creative reordering of adult perception, often achieved through a process of inverting elements of the adult order, that the social world of children generates its own system of meanings. Hence, the true nature of the culture of childhood frequently remains hidden from adults, for the semantic cues which permit social recognition have been manipulated and disguised by children in terms of their alternative society.

By confusing the adult order children create for themselves considerable room for movement within the limits imposed upon them by adult society. This deflection of adult perception is crucial for both the maintenance and continuation of the child's culture and for the growth of the concept of the self for the individual child. The process of becoming social involves a conceptual separation between 'self' and 'other'. This process is often described in terms of 'socialization', a model which stresses the passive mimicry of others. I would suggest, however, that this process is better seen in terms of an active experience of contradiction, often with the adult world. It is thus of great significance that something which is despised and regarded as diseased and inedible by the adult world should be given great prestige as a particularly desirable form of food by the child. The transformation of 'kets' from rubbish into food is both logical and consistent with the child's culture.

Food for thought

The notion that food might be a subject worthy of discussion in its own right has long been ignored by social anthropologists. Past ethnographers have either made only fleeting references to what people eat or have submerged the topic under more general headings such as agricultural production, economics and ritual.

However, with the publication of Le Totemisme Aujourd'hui (1962) and Lévi-Strauss's provocative suggestion that animals are 'good to think with', the subject of food in relation to the social body has become increasingly central in the discipline (1969:162) (see Leach 1964 ; Douglas 1966 ; Bulmer 1967 ; and Tambiah 1969). In all these analyses it is argued that ideas people hold concerning the edibility of certain types of food are linked logically to other conceptual domains and that, by examining a people's food categories, a more penetrating and incisive explanation of other aspects of the social system can be achieved. Tambiah argues that 'cultures and social systems are, after all, not only thought but also lived' so that particular attention should be given to exactly what people let inside their bodies (1973:165).

More recently Mary Douglas (1975) has directly confronted the subject of food in her analysis of the major food categories in Britain. She identifies the two main categories as meals and drinks. Of the two, meals are more highly ranked and ordered, being internally structured into 'first, second, main (and) sweet' courses, whereas drinks possess no such structuring (1975:255). Meals are also externally structured by a temporal order - breakfast followed by dinner and tea - which parallels the weekly cycle, climaxing in Sunday dinner, a pattern repeated in the annual sequence of ceremonial meals. Drinks, in contrast, are 'not invested with any necessity in their ordering' (ibid:255).

Douglas further suggests that, besides these major categories of food, some 'food can be taken for private nourishment' but it is likely to be condemned if considered 'to interfere with the next meal' (ibid:254). It is here that she locates sweets, but hers is an adult perspective. Sweets, for adults, are regarded as an adjunct to "real" food and should not usurp the place of meals. For the child, as I hope to show, the reverse is true: it is meals which disrupt the eating of sweets.

Sweet thoughts

Sweets - as in 'Ye Olde Sweete Shoppe' - are an entirely British phenomenon. There is no equivalent abroad and the British sweet industry, in its production of a very extensive range of confectionery, seems to be unique. The concept of the sweetmeat is the nearest parallel to the kinds of confections available in other countries, but it is absent from the supermarket shelves and non-specialist sweet shops in this country.

The European sweetmeat dates back to the seventeenth century with the discovery of sugar. During this period sweetmeats were an integral part of the rich man's menu, forming part of the meal, as is often the case in other countries. Today, in Britain, the sweetmeat is best visualized as a home-made confection to be found on Women's Institute stalls or delicately displayed in tiny baking cases in a traditional confectioner's shop. Mass production techniques have replaced the sweetmeat with similar, but not identical, pre-packed products. However, although the sweetmeat has largely disappeared and the traditional sweet shop must now compete with cinemas, newsagents and slot-machines, the sweetmeat's

successor strikingly resembles its forerunner in many aspects. In this sense the sweet, for adults, may be closer to the major food categories than Douglas (1975) supposes. 'Kets', the child's sweets, are an entirely different matter.

Kets and Sweets

'Kets' and sweets must not be confused. Although the distinction may seem to be purely linguistic other more substantive issues indicate that 'kets' are a very distinctive kind of confectionery, belonging exclusively to the world of children.

The analysis presented below is based on observations made whilst working in a youth club in a small North Eastern village. The children referred to range in age from 11 to 17 but age group distinctions are relatively fluid due to the tight-knit nature of the community. A main focus of activity, for children of all ages in the youth club, is the buying and selling of sweets, primarily of the 'ketty' variety, although older children tend more towards other kinds of sweets. However, children almost always use the word 'kets', whilst adults prefer the word 'sweets'; occasionally, adults may jokingly refer to 'kets', especially if they are confections bought for children, but would never use this word for sweets they themselves are going to consume.

It would seem, therefore, that the term 'kets' usually is used for those sweets at the lower end of the price range and it is these sweets which children most often buy. It could be argued therefore that the distinction between 'kets' and other kinds of confectionery rests solely on economic factors. However, before assuming that children buy 'kets' because they are cheap and that children, in general, have less money to spend than adults, certain problems should be considered. Why don't adults buy 'kets'? For 10p., the price of a chocolate bar, they could buy ten pieces of bubble gum. Furthermore, although it is certainly true that children tend to buy the cheaper sweets, it is apparent from field data that the total amount of money spent by a child on sweets at any one time may be quite considerable. A typical purchase might be: four "Fizz Bombs" at 1p each; three "Liquorice Novelties" at 2p each and two "Bubble gums" at 1p each. The total outlay, 12p, could buy two small chocolate bars, which are also available at the club. This may be an example of getting more for one's money, but another factor should be taken into account. The spending power of children is obviously an important consideration for manufacturers, but if this were the sole criterion influencing production, why would manufacturers not produce miniature versions of the kinds of confections available in the higher price range? Some years ago it was possible to purchase slim bars of Cadbury's chocolate for one old penny and a slightly larger version for twopence. The equivalent products today are tiny "Milky Ways" and "Mars Bars" sold in bags as "Family Packs". Why do manufacturers not sell them singly? The answer seems to be that there is no demand for them.

Children, then, do not buy 'kets' simply because they are cheaper or have a lower unit price. 'Kets' have other properties, besides their cheapness, which make them important for the child. Manufacturers may not be exploiting the power of the child's purse directly, but more insidiously, the power inherent in the conceptual gulf between the worlds of the adult and the child.

Junk Food

In order to resolve such problematic issues concerning the attractions of 'kets' I carried out a statistical survey, dividing the range of confectionery into three groups. The term 'kets' was given to all those sweets costing less than 5p. An intermediate group was established for sweets costing between 6p and 10p and a third group contained all sweets costing 11p or more, including the more expensive boxes of chocolates. By isolating 'kets' as a distinct group according to price it was possible to examine further more elusive contrasts between 'kets' and other sweets, an investigation which suggested that the alternative adult meaning of the word 'kets' - rubbish - was indeed a powerful and persuasive metaphor. Much of the attraction of 'kets' seems to lie precisely in the way they stand in contrast to conventional adult sweets and adult eating patterns generally. This is apparent in their names, their colours, the sensations they induce, their presentation and the descriptions of their contents, as well as in the timing and manner of their consumption.

If adults regard 'kets' as rubbish, low in nutritive value and essentially "junk food", then it is quite logical that manufacturers should label their products in an appropriate manner. 'Kets' are often given names which emphasize their inedibility and rubbishy content in adult terms. Many have names usually reserved for mechanical and utilitarian objects which adults would never dream of eating. Children, however, will gleefully consume them. There are, for example, Syco Discs, Fizzy Bullets, Supersonic Flyers, Robots, Traffic Lights, Coconut Bongos, Diddy Bags, Telephones, Catherine Wheels, Golf Balls, Pipes, Jelly Wellies, Star Ships and Car Parks. Other kinds of sweets rarely have such names.

Not only do children consume what is inedible they also ingest many 'animals' whose consumption normally is abhorred by adults and which are surrounded by dietary taboos.[3] Cannibalism, too, ranks highly. Thus children find themselves eating Mr. Marble, Mickey Mouse, Yogi Bear, Mighty Monkey, Snakes, Kangaroos, Spooks, Jelly Footballers, Dinosaurs, Lucky Black Cats, Dormice, Bright Babies, Jelly Gorillas and Fun Faces.

This rubbishy attribute of 'kets' is highlighted when the above names are compared to the names given to other more expensive kinds of sweets. These often describe the actual composition of the confectionery and frequently yield precise and detailed information for the consumer. Adults, it seems, like to know what they are eating. In this range there are names such as Munchie Mints, Butterscotch, Assorted Nut Toffee, Nut Brittle, Coconut Whirls, Rum and Butter Toffee, Caramel, Peppermint Lumps, Toffimallow, Royal Butter Mints, Liquorice Bon Bons and Chocolate Coconut Ice.

Although a few 'kets' possess descriptive names the unfamiliar eater should beware of assuming that the description refers to the taste. The names 'Seafood', 'Shrimps' and 'Jelly Eels' may lead to the expectation of a savoury sweet; they are, however, sweet and sickly. 'Rhubarb and Custard' and 'Fruit Salad' are hard, chewy 'kets' presenting a marked contrast to the sloppy puddings implied by the names. Such inversions and contradictions of the accepted adult order are an essential facet of the child's world so that 'Silly Toffee Banana' and 'Orozo Hard Juice' could only be 'kets'.[4]

'Kets' are mostly brightly coloured, as in the luminous blues and fluorescent oranges of the "Fizz Bomb" and the vivid yellows and reds of many jellied 'kets'. Some have contrasting stripes, with clashing colours as in the "Liquorice Novelty". Here, black strips of liquorice are festooned with shocking greens, reds and blues. All these harsh, saturated colours are absent from the "real" food of the adult world. Blue, especially, is banned; bright blue belongs to the realm of iced cakes and such concoctions are a highly ceremonial form of food, divorced from the everyday menu.[5] Many sweets, also aimed at the child's market but not classed here as 'kets', are similarly coloured: for example, "Smarties", "Jelly Tots", "Jelly Babies" and "Liquorice Allsorts". Such bright and stimulating colours are not normally associated with the dinner plate.

In contrast, the sweets which are aimed primarily at an adult market have a more uniform and duller appearance. Most are coated in chocolate, presenting exteriors of shades of brown, significantly known today as "natural" - i.e. healthy - colours . In the more expensive boxes of chocolates the highly saturated colours of the 'kets' are present, but they are masked by a coating of chocolate and hidden from sight. Where chocolate is not used, the colours of these sweets tend towards pastel shades, soft, delicate colours inoffensive to the eye, as in "Sugared Almonds" or "Mints". The "Humbug", with its sedate black and white stripes, is a poor relation of the 'Gob Stopper" and lacks its coat of many colours. For sweets to be suitable for adult consumption, highly saturated colours must be avoided, for such colours are not present in "real" food, and adults, unlike children, are conservative about what they class as edible.[6]

The eating of this metaphoric rubbish by children is a serious business and adults should be wary of tackling 'kets' for, unlike other sweets, 'kets' are a unique digestive experience. Many of the names given to 'kets' hint at this: "Fizzy Bullets", "Fizz Bombs", "Fizz Balls", "Festoon Fizzle Sticks", "Fizzy Lizzies" and 'Fruit Fizzles" all stress the tingling sensation to be gained from eating them. Many 'kets' contain sherbert, and "Sherbits", "Refreshers", "Sherbo Dabs", "Dip Dabs", "Sherbert Fountains", "Double Dip Sherbert" and even "Love Hearts" all make the mouth smart while eating them.

In contrast other sweets provide little in the way of exciting consumption. The nearest rival among these sweets to the explosive taste of many 'kets' is the "Extra Strong Mint" - a poor rival to the "Knock Out Lolly". The stress on citrus fruit flavours and the tangy, often acrid, taste of many 'kets' contrasts radically with the preponderance for sugary or nutty flavours in adult confections. The ferocious taste of a "Fizz Bomb" is quite distinctive and lingers in the mouth for a long time, temporarily putting the other taste buds out of action.

Chocolate, which is a favoured ingredient in sweets aimed at the adult consumer, is rare among 'kets' but may appear as chocolate flavour. There is a range of 'kets' styled in the shapes of hammers, saws and chisels which, although appearing to be chocolate, are in fact made from a substitute. Similarly, "Cheroots" look like long sticks of chocolate, but have a gritty texture and are dry and tasteless. They lack the rich, creamy taste and smooth texture so beloved by the advertisers of real chocolate.

This marked difference in taste and texture between 'kets' and other sweets lies naturally in the ingredients used in their manufacture. 'Kets' are frequently unwrapped so that a list of ingredients is difficult to obtain but common substances include: sugar, glucose, edible gum, edible vegetable oil, citric acid and assorted flavourings. Other sweets, in contrast, proudly list their ingredients, frequently stressing their "natural goodness". For example a message on the wrapper of a "Picnic" chocolate bar states in large letters that the bar contains: 'Milk chocolate with peanuts, wafer, toffee and raisin centre'. In much smaller print it admits that the chocolate contains vegetable fat - thus lessening its nutritive properties and desirability - but stresses that there is a minimum of 20% milk solids which must not be overlooked.

It would seem, therefore, that sweets, as opposed to 'kets', are to be valued as a form of food. The "Picnic", as its name suggests, is to be regarded as a source of nourishment. These kinds of sweets are, like the sweetmeat, closely associated with our major food categories and many can be concocted at home from common household ingredients. Cookery books include recipes for sweets such as truffles, peppermint creams, coconut ice and toffee. 'Kets', on the other hand, are impossible to reproduce in the kitchen.

Thus sweets belong to the realm of "real" food, to the private world of the kitchen, and are bound to the concept of the meal. They have names indicative of their wholesomeness; their flavours echo the patterns of taste normally associated with the dessert - the sweet course - of the meal. Mary Douglas suggests that it is 'the capacity to recall the whole by the structure of the parts' which has insured the survival of the British biscuit in our diet and similarly it is this mimetic quality of the sweet which has kept it bound to the realm of "real" food (1974:747). 'Kets', in contrast, are, by their very nature, removed from the adult domestic sphere and belong to the public, social world of children. In name, taste and consumptive experience, 'kets' belong to the disorderly and inverted world of children, for in this alternative world a new order exists which makes the 'ket' an eminently desirable product.

Lévi-Strauss (1975) suggests that the differing culinary modes to be found in a particular culture may reflect its conceptual categories and it is in this light that the adult meaning of the word 'kets' becomes highly significant. If sweets belong to the adult world, the human cultural world of cooked foods as opposed to the natural, raw food of the animal kingdom, then 'kets' belong in a third category. Neither raw nor cooked, according to the adult perspective, 'kets' are a kind of rotten food. These rubbishy, decaying and diseased sweets are the peculiar property of children who are, from the adult perspective, a tainted group. Children are, from the adult point of view, pre-social, in need of training and correction through the process of socialization and thus it is quite consistent that it should be 'kets' which children regard as their most social form of food. Mary Douglas has argued that 'consuming is finding consistent meanings' and that goods are purchased and needed 'for making visible and stable the categories of culture' (1977:292-3). In this sense the literal consumption of different kinds of confectionery by adults and children reflects the inherent contradiction between their separate worlds.

Metaphoric Meals

Mary Douglas (1975) argues that the eating of meals involves a whole series of rituals concerning both the presentation and consumption of food. Food is served on different kinds of plates according to the kind of meal. It is eaten with cutlery of assorted shapes and sizes, which transfers food from plate to mouth. The use of the fingers for this act is frowned upon by adults and rarely should food enter the mouth by hand. Chicken legs become embarrassing to eat in the company of others and the eating of lobsters entails a battery of dissecting instruments. Finger bowls and serviettes are provided for the eaters of such foods to remove any particles adhering to the hands or lips. As Goffman suggests, 'greasy foods that are not considered to contaminate the mouth can yet be felt to contaminate the hands should contact have to be made without insulation by utensils' (1971:73). The more ceremonial the meal the more crockery and cutlery necessary to facilitate the eating of it.

Those sweets which are to be regarded as belonging to the realm of "real" food must be similarly distanced from the body, unlike the non-food 'kets'. 'Kets' are usually unwrapped, whereas other sweets tend to be heavily packaged, for the layers of paper provide the necessary separation between the inner and outer body. The phrase "a hand to mouth existence" - a poor and despised condition - emphasises the necessity for maintaining this purity. As with the eating of meals, the more packaging provided, the more ceremonial the sweet and the further it is removed from the 'ketty' sphere. The ultimate example is the box of chocolates, which is shrouded in paper. Like the eating of meals, these sweets must be insulated against contamination from external sources.[7]

The "After Eight Mint" is superlative in this respect. The clock face printed on the box is repeated on each tiny envelope which encases the sweet and it registers the time at which this confection should ideally be consumed. Its other name - the "After Dinner Mint" - secures the place of this chocolate as a highly ordered kind of confection inextricably bound to the concept of the meal. Douglas (1975) suggests that meals are externally ordered by time and that it is the temporal sequence of meals which is used to divide up the day. The "After Eight Mint" confirms the suspicion that the eating of sweets by adults should be similarly structured.

After the meal has been eaten, the sweets may be passed round. Their tray shaped box and insulating containers recall the crockery and cutlery of the meal and the hand is allowed minimum contact with the sweet. The most criminal of acts, frequently indulged in by children, is to finger the sweets for, as with the meal, food must scarcely be handled. To nibble a sweet and then to replace it in the box, again common practice among children, is never allowed amongst adults for that which has been in the mouth must ideally remain there.[8]

Just as ceremonial meals have a yearly temporal cycle so does the purchase and consumption of sweets. Boxes of chocolates are bought at Christmas, birthdays and other ritual occasions, as is apparent from television advertising: in the week before Christmas many of the usual sweet adverts are replaced by ones for the more luxurious boxes of chocolates.

One major ceremonial sweet, heavily packaged and adorned, is not, however, aimed at adults directly. This is the Easter Egg, given by adults to children. The Easter Egg bears all the characteristics of an acceptable adult sweet and encapsulates the whole ethos of the adult's conception of food. Firstly, it marks a ritual season. The silver-paper covered egg sits resplendent in a highly decorated cardboard box, frequently adorned with ribbon. Under the outer layers the chocolate egg can be found, already separated into two, to avoid much contact with the hand. It is easily pulled apart to reveal a packet of highly-coloured sweets, such as "Smarties" or "Jelly Tots", which although ostensibly similar to 'kets' are in fact much less 'ketty'. It is significant that Easter Eggs are never stuffed with 1p "Bubble Gums". The Easter Egg is strictly ordered in both its construction and its consumption and is ultimately representative of the adult's, rather than the child's, conception of acceptable food.[9]

'Kets', however, are never subject to such constraints. Most 'kets' can be found piled high in a cardboard box on the shop counter, with no respect for variety or flavour, into which children's hands delve and rummage. Few 'kets' are individually wrapped and, if they are, the packaging is minimal. Children do not heed the purity rules of adults. They frequently share their sweets, offering each other bites or sucks of a 'ket'. The absence of wrappers leaves the fingers sticky; dirty hands break off pieces to offer to friends. 'Kets' are fished out of pockets along with other articles and "Bubble Gum" is stuck to the under side of tables to be reserved for later use.

'Kets' are not distanced from the body. Indeed, many are specifically designed to conflict with the adult's abhorrence of food entering the mouth by hand: "Gob Stoppers" are removed from the mouth for comparison of colour changes and strings of chewing gum continually pulled out of the mouth. Hands become covered in 'ket' and the normal eating conventions, instilled by parents during early childhood, are flagrantly disregarded.[10]

Indeed some 'kets' seem not to be designed for eating at all: "Gob Stoppers" fill the mouth totally, not allowing any of the normal digestive processes to begin. "Chews" produce an aching jaw - reminiscent of eating tough meat - and "Fizz Bombs" simply have to be endured. "Bubble Gum" is chewed vigorously but is never swallowed; instead it is expelled from the mouth in a bubble and held at the point of entry until it bursts, spattering the face with particles of sticky gum to be picked off piecemeal later. "Lollipops" are pulled in and out of the mouth and "Jelly Footballers" first decapitated. "Space Dust", perhaps the ultimate 'ket', has no rival. The powder is placed on the tongue where it begins to explode while the mouth remains open and the ears and throat buzz and smart.[11]

The frequent examination of each other's tongues during the process of eating 'kets', together with the other eating techniques required to consume them, manifest a rejection of the mannered and ordered conventions of adult society. The joy with which a dirty finger probes the mouth to extract a wine gum contrasts strongly with the need for a tooth pick to perform a comparable operation at table.

'Kets' therefore are the antithesis of the adult conception of "real" food while, for adults, sweets are metonymic meals.[12] 'Kets' involve a rejection of the series of rituals and symbols surrounding the concept of the meal and are regarded as rubbish by adults. Because they are despised by the adult world, they are prized by the child's and become the metaphoric meals of childhood. Although children will consume sweets of any kind, it is 'kets' which the child will most often buy. Adults never buy them. The child's private funds, which are not controlled by adults, are appropriately spent on those sweets symbolic of his world. 'Kets', deemed by the adult world to be rubbish, are under the child's control.

As in the adult world, where food has an important social aspect, 'kets' and the owning of 'kets' are symbols of prestige for the child. Many 'kets' are sold with additional novelties such as football picture cards or tattoes. These items can be swapped, bartered or sold and used as symbols of friendship or as peace offerings among younger children. The child who has the most picture cards or who distributes 'kets' gains a peculiar kind of prestige and his social status is momentarily elevated, just as the provision and sharing of food operates as a social medium among adults.

The importance of these metaphoric meals for children cannot be overstated. 'Ket' times are in-between meal times and the eating of 'kets' begins almost as soon as the adult meal is over, lasting until the structure of adult society again disrupts their consumption. In our society such continual eating of sweets by adults would be classed as a medical disorder requiring a cure.

Not surprisingly, given the coherent and persistent structure of the child's culture, children have an immense knowledge of the varieties of 'kets' available and are always careful to distinguish between them. "Chewing Gum" is 'chut' or 'chewy' as opposed to "Bubble Gum" which is 'bubbly'. A lollipop is rarely simply called a 'lolly', but instead a "Kojak" or a "Traffic Light". Planning one's meal is a serious business.

Conclusion

'Kets', therefore, are the child's food, the food over which he has maximum control. By eating 'kets' rather than other sweets children force confrontations with the adult order, for 'kets' have been despised by adults. The esteem which is attached to 'kets' is emphasised by the ridicule and disgust expressed by the child towards adult food, which is food over which children have little control.

Children are highly articulate in their views on food and school lunches come in for high contempt. The authoritarian structure of the school frequently denies any self-expression by the child so it is significant that it is school dinners which are most abused. Mashed potatoes are known as 'Mashy Arty' or 'shit' when too salty. Mushy peas are likened to 'snot' and school rice pudding looks as if someone has 'hockled' (spat) into it. Semolina is like 'frogspawn'. Thus the foods which children are forced to put inside their bodies by adults are given the status of the excretions which pass out. The most graphic statement of all goes as follows:

Yellow belly custard, green snot pie,
Mix them up with a dead dog's eye.
Mix it thin, mix it thick,
Swallow it down with a hot cup of sick.

As Charlotte Hardman comments, children perceive the adults' 'weaknesses and responsibilities in connection with food and drink' and much time is spent in reducing 'adult order to humorous disorder' (1974:6). Food is used as weapons by children, but more vehement than the physical attacks with food are the verbal onslaughts directed by children against adults and their control of food:

Old Mrs. Riley had a fat cow,
She milked it, she milked it
She didn't know how.
She pulled its tail instead of its tit
Poor Mrs. Riley covered in shit.

The implied sympathy contained in the last line of this rhyme is not genuine for gales of laughter always accompany the relating of this event.

Finally, if food is equated with harmfulness by the child, it is logical that non-food should be esteemed. 'Kets' are regarded by children as being particularly beneficial but other substances are also considered to be worth investigating. Children frequently dare each other to eat the literally inedible. Sawdust, plant leaves and other natural substances are often consumed, but a particular favourite is the game called "Fag-Chewing". A cigarette is passed round with each child taking a draw until all the tobacco is gone. The unfortunate person left with the filter is then made to eat it or, at the very least, to chew it. Such activity is reminiscent of Jimmy Boyle's (1977) memories of a Glasgow childhood, where one child was ostracised until the others discovered that he could eat worms.

This ability to consume metaphoric rubbish is an integral part of the child's culture. Children, by the very nature of their position as a group outside adult society, have sought out an alternative system of meanings through which they can establish their own integrity. Adult order is manipulated so that what adults esteem is made to appear ridiculous; what adults despise is invested with prestige. As has been amply demonstrated in the analysis of other 'muted groups' (see Ardener 1972) and counter-cultural movements (see Young 1979), those groups who are excluded or suppressed may possess an alternative conceptual system for defining the self which reinterprets the social models of the wider society.

For children 'kets' are an important vehicle for defining the self. As I have suggested elsewhere (James 1979) regarding names, adult labels for children are destroyed and a new name - a nickname - is created by children out of the remnants. Similarly the adult, ordered conception of food is thrown into disarray by the child. Adults continually urge their offspring to eat up their food and lament that they are "fussy eaters", but children are only pernickety in adult terms. Indeed children stuff into their mouths a wide variety of substances; it is just that these are abhorred by adults.

The eating of 'kets' thus represents a metaphoric chewing up of adult order. Food belongs to the adult world and is symbolic of the adult's control over children. By disordering and confusing the conceptual categories of the adult world children erect a new boundary over which adults have no authority. Mary Douglas (1966) has argued that a corollary of the image of dirt as disordering and anomalous is that it can be associated with power. The eating of dirty, decaying 'kets' is condemned by adults and it is this very condemnation which allows the child to assume control over at least one of his orifices. By eating that which is ambiguous in adult terms the child establishes an alternative system of meanings which adults cannot perceive. It is this which allows the culture of childhood to flourish largely unnoticed by adults and, at the same time, to exist largely beyond their control.

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NOTES

1. The term 'sweets' is roughly equivalent to the American term 'candy'.

2. Marie Johnson (personal communication) has pointed out that the Icelandic word for meat or flesh is kjöt and an alternative rendering is ket. Norwegian for meat is similarly kjøtt. This evidence suggests therefore that ket, meaning diseased meat, is possibly derived from Scandinavia.

3. Children delight in eating the inedible and the recent success of Raymond Brigg's Fungus the Bogey Man (1977) is witness to this. Bogeymen have, like children, inverted the accepted food categories and for breakfast consume such delicacies as: 'rotton grapefruits, Oxfoot marmalade, Flaked Corns and Golden Waxy bits'.

4. The eating of such disordered food is consistent with the child's culture, but adults abhor such anomalies. On sweet wrappers and other foodstuffs there is a guarantee issued which states that: 'This product should reach you in perfect condition. If it does not, please return it' ("Twix" wrapper). 'Kets', on the other hand, offer no such guarantee.

5. It is important to note that bright, artificial colours do appear in "real" food but such foods are also classed as "junk". Many instant products - e.g. Angel Delight and cake mixes - have extremely bright colours. Bright colours appear often in food at children's parties - e.g. jellies, blancmange and cakes. Such food, like 'kets', is also regarded as being detrimental and essentially rubbishy.

6. Birren provides an example of the conservative nature of adult attitudes to food. He cites a Western baker 'who once tried to market bread inppastel tints such as blue and violet (and) found the venture a dismal failure' (1961:167).

7. This trend in packaging has recently increased. Vegetables are hygienically scrubbed to remove any trace of soil and sold in vacuum-sealed packs in supermarkets, insuring minimum contact with external sources. Similarly a recent advert for a brand of frozen peas claims as its most valued asset that the peas are frozen within five minutes of being picked, again minimising the risk of contamination.

8. Goffman substantiates this point with respect to food: 'Note that in this matter of markings (traces left by the body) knives function in an interesting way ... since they provide the means of taking without contaminating, as middle class children learn the first time their mother finds a teeth-marked crater in a cake, a loaf of bread of a piece of fruit. These craters are defiling, and it is very important to disinfect the object and its setting by cutting away with a clean knife until only a flat surface remains' (1971:72).

9. There is a smaller, less ceremonial Easter Egg on the market which seems to be aimed at the child market. It has some 'ketty' qualities, for the cream filled egg, although appearing to contain albumen and yolk, is extremely sweet to eat, and far removed from the taste associated with fried eggs, which it closely resembles.

10. A difference may be noted between "chewing gum" and "bubble gum". "Chewing gum" is often eaten by adults as well as children whereas "bubble gum" seems to be restricted to children. "Chewing gum" is heavily packaged and pale cream in colour, while "bubble gum" is far more 'ketty' and has only one wrapper. Moreover "bubble gum" is available in a variety of colours, e.g. pink and turquoise, the non-food colours.

11. "Space Dust" is particularly interesting. It has only recently appeared on the market and was initially very popular although costing 12p, well above the normal price range of 'kets'. It is brightly coloured and has all the necessary qualifications for being a 'ket', but children are ambivalent about it. One possible explanation for this is that "Space Dust" involves too bold a statement about the appeal of 'kets' for children and thus is often dismissed by them as being 'stupid' or 'daft'.

12. Adverts for sweets for adults fully substantiate this idea and the eating of sweets for adults is portrayed as (1) helping to achieve a desired end - e.g. A "Flake" gives a girl the world of motor boats and a "Bounty" provides 'the taste of paradise'; (2) substitute food - e.g. 'A Mars a Day helps you work rest and play'; or (3) an additional, nourishing extra which will not affect normal food intake - e.g. 'A Milky Way is the sweet you can eat between meals without ruining your appetite'. 'Kets' are rarely advertised but one advert for a "Fizz Bomb" shows cartoon children, with their eyeballs whizzing round in opposite directions. Far from stressing the utilitarian aspects of eating sweets - whether as a source of physical or mental strength - 'kets' are to be recommended as an unforgettable gastronomic experience.

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