

3

Diet and nutrition

Food is more than just a source of nutrition. In all human societies it plays many roles and is deeply embedded in the social, religious and economic aspects of everyday life. For people in these societies it also carries with it a range of symbolic meanings, both expressing and creating the relationships between man and man, between man and his deities, and man and the natural environment. Food is an essential part of the way that any society organizes itself, and of the way it views the world that it inhabits. To some extent you are what you eat – or what you refuse to eat.

The anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss¹ argued that, just as there is no human society that does not have a spoken language, so also is there no human group that does not in some way process some of its food supply through cooking. In fact, the constant transformation of raw into cooked food is one of the defining features of all human societies, a key criterion of *culture* as opposed to *nature*.

Anthropologists have further pointed out how cultural groups differ markedly from one another in many of their beliefs and practices related to food. For example, there are wide variations throughout the world as to what substances are regarded as food and what are not. Foodstuffs that are eaten in one society or group may be rigorously forbidden in another. There are also variations between cultures as to how food is cultivated, harvested, prepared, served and eaten. Each culture usually has a set of implicit rules that determine

who prepares and serves the food and to whom, which individuals or groups eat together, where and on what occasions the consumption of food takes place, the order of dishes within a meal, and the actual manner of eating the food. All of these stages in food consumption are closely patterned by culture, and are part of the accepted way of life of that community.

In most parts of the world the actual preparation of food is usually the task of women,² but in many societies they are also closely involved in its production: milking animals, caring for poultry and livestock, and planting, tending and harvesting a wide variety of crops. In many rural parts of the Third World women also play a leading role in the retail marketing of food, such as the famous ‘market women’ of West Africa, the Caribbean and parts of Latin America.

CULTURAL CLASSIFICATIONS OF FOOD

Because of the central role of food in daily life, especially in social relationships, dietary beliefs and practices are notoriously difficult to change, even if they interfere with adequate nutrition. Many well-meaning nutritionists, nurses and doctors have discovered this fact in dealing with cultures other than their own. Before these beliefs and practices can be modified or improved, it is important to understand the way that each culture views