

Commensality and the Organization of Social Relations

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Introduction

The earliest serious discussion of commensality can be traced to W. Robertson Smith, who, in his study of the religion of the Semites, discusses the god and his worshippers in a sacrifice as 'commensals' (Smith, 1957 [1889]: 260). While his focus is on religion and eating together on occasions of sacrifices, he points out that "those who eat and drink together are by this very act tied to one another by a bond of friendship and mutual obligation" (Smith, 1957 [1889]: 265). In today's social science rhetoric, this means that commensality is not just a biological act of consuming food; it is also a communicative act which has the significance of social relations. It is relevant to the study of social organization, which when perceived broadly includes political organization. Since eating together is a social act that has communicative significance, it involves rules of hierarchy and solidarity, boundary making as well as symbolic expression. All these have implications for the organization of social relations. While some social anthropologists have in their writings mentioned commensality,¹ most have taken it for granted, as when they write about communal celebration and feasts; only a few such as Anigbo (1987, 1996) have made commensality the focus of their study. However, feasts have long attracted the attention of anthropologists, historians, and archaeologists; and feasts are associated with commensality, which historians and anthropologists, including ethnologists and archaeologists, are now paying attention to (cf. Dietler and Hayden, 2001a).

According to the *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary* (2014), the word commensal, meaning one who eats at the same table, is derived from the Latin word *com* (together) and *mensalis* (of the table). In Latin, table is *mensa*. Thus commensality may be understood simply as eating together. Not all languages have a specific term for this, but the same phenomenon is understood and may be described in different ways. I learned from my first anthropological fieldwork in 1972, then as an undergraduate student, among a Malaysian aboriginal community (known as Orang

Asli), a very simple Malay term that gave me the first lesson of commensality and boundary making. These Orang Asli often used the Malay term *tak sama makan* (not eating together) to draw the line between them and the Malays who were Muslims, and usually declined the invitation of the Orang Asli to eat together at their home. Similarly, when they wanted to emphasize solidarity with the Chinese, who were not Muslims, they used the term *sama makan* (eat together or can eat together). Thus *sama makan* and *tak sama makan* indicate commensality and non-commensality: a way of describing social and ethnic relations through the metaphor of food. Years later, in my research in Sarawak in East Malaysia, I found the terms are also used by other non-Muslim indigenous peoples in relation to Muslims.

Grignon (2001) has used the terms domestic commensality, institutional commensality, everyday commensality, exceptional commensality, segregative commensality, etc. These are convenient usages that may be adopted, but it is better to group the types of commensality into a few broad categories. In this chapter I will discuss domestic commensality, kin and communal commensality, ceremonial and religious commensality, political commensality, and hospitality commensality. While domestic commensality is the most basic human experience of commensality, commensality beyond the family must have grown out of the human experience of eating together as the most effective and welcome way of getting people together and to have fun. Conviviality through eating together is the basis of commensality.

In this chapter I will first discuss the various forms of commensality and the significance of commensality in human social interaction, with the focus on organizing social relations.² Jack Goody, in his discussion of the anthropological theoretical approaches to the study of food, begins with a discussion of the study of commensality, in particular Robertson Smith's view of commensalism and maintenance of social relations, thus the functional approach (Goody, 1982: 13). We need not be concerned with fitting the discussion into any theoretical approach. I shall discuss various forms of commensality with some emphasis on commensality as a human social institution that expresses the value of hospitality, which is significant for cultivating social relations. This is a kind of commensality, which may be called hospitality commensality. There is hospitality in commensality but commensal hospitality can be very instrumental for attaining certain aims, and in this respect all commensality beyond the domestic sphere is political. Hospitality commensality may express symbolic capital and cultivate social relation, but the immediate aim is really to celebrate a social relation and to give hospitality and show friendship.

Domestic commensality

Domestic commensality may be considered the most basic form of commensality. This is despite the fact that Smith (1957 [1889]: 279) had warned about assuming commensality as an extension of the family meal, since in some cultures men do not

eat with their wives and children. But this is due to rules of commensality in a family or kin group because of gender hierarchy or other considerations. Nevertheless, eating as members of a family, even if not all the members are at the same table due to rules of hierarchy based on age or gender, must be an important experience and adaptation in human evolution. Here there is also the sharing of food acquired or produced by one or more members of the family. In fact historically the primary bond between the mother and the child is the bond of mother giving her breast milk to the child. After the child is able to take solid food there is the experience of the child eating with the mother and other members of the family. Sharing food with family members is a very basic experience within the family and this cultivates a deep bond over the years. It is the most primary form of commensality. Domestic commensality begins with parents providing food for their children. Thus in the parents-children commensality, there is the commensalism that biologists are familiar with, which exists between two kinds of organism in which one obtains food and offers protection for the other. Indeed commensalism does exist in many kinds of human commensality, in the form of one person or one party providing food for the commensals.

Ethnographic evidence today shows that there are different expectations of domestic commensality. Some, such as the Italians that Carole Counihan has studied, regard family meals as strictly for family members except when specially invited, and members of the family are expected to eat together. Outsiders and even relatives who are not members of domestic commensality are expected to leave when a family is about to have their meal, as indicated by the setting of a tablecloth (Counihan, 2004: 118). Cultural diversity aside, there is also the class factor. Generally poor families may not always insist on eating at the same table. In China, workers and peasants are often seen eating alone and even roaming about while eating, carrying the bowl that contains rice and some cooked food. In a rural village in Yongchun, Fujian in China, where I have studied, I often saw individual villagers carrying their rice and dishes in a bowl in the left hand and handling the chopsticks in the right hand, and roaming to a neighbor's house to eat in order to join a conversation, especially when there was a visitor; now and then going back to his or her house to get more rice or dishes. I call this roaming eating (Tan, 2003). This does not mean there is no domestic commensality, for most of the time the members of the family do eat together, or they are the members who are "legitimate" to eat together as a household. In fact, in the kind of roaming eating that I have just described, individuals may be eating at the same time with other members of their family, but may just wander off with their bowl of rice and dishes. Anyway, it is convenient to eat together to share whatever food a domestic group has. In modern affluent families, it is obviously convenient for the preparation of food and cleaning up if all eat at the same time.

The Kelabit in Sarawak, Malaysia, have a similar way of bringing food to eat with a neighbor but it is not roaming eating. In May 1990 I stayed for a short period of

time with a family in Arur Dalan in Bario, the present Kelabit homeland in Sarawak. I had meals with the family. A neighbor whom I got to know quite well often joined us for dinner. However, he always brought his own plate of rice and dishes to join us, although he also ate some of the dishes cooked by the family I stayed with. My point is that there are different arrangements and expectations of commensality, and anthropologists should pay attention to this.

Among some peoples, such as the Yi and the Ersu in Sichuan in China and the Kelabit in Sarawak, the fireplace is symbolic of domestic commensality. In the case of the Yi and Ersu, the fireplace is in fact made in the living room of a traditional Yi or Ersu house, where family members gather and guests are entertained. Of course the fireplace is not only used for cooking, the heat from the fire also provides warmth in cold weather. What is significant is that the fireplace is made in the living room. It is also here that guests are received and where hospitality commensality (see Figure 2.1) is arranged.

Domestic commensality is the most basic form of commensality that grows out of the convenience of members of a closely related family eating together. These family



Figure 2.1 Ersu fireplace (photo: Tan Chee-Beng)

members, which normally constitute a household, are entitled or expected to share the food resources. The anthropological definition of a household is based on a unit that shares cooking and, if possible, daily domestic commensality. Family division into separate households is marked by separate cooking and separate domestic commensality, and in this respect domestic commensality can be political, too. But domestic commensality is generally characterized by the expectation of care and sharing. This assumes special significance on festive occasions when the union of the family is emphasized. The Chinese New Year eve reunion dinner and the American Christmas dinner are obvious examples. Because of the care and warmth in domestic commensality, inviting a friend to join a family meal is a very warm gesture, and so hospitality commensality that is extended from domestic commensality is a very special kind of commensality.

Kin and communal commensality

Kin or members of a community need to get together every so often to celebrate, to grieve or to perform communal religious rites. Such celebrations call for conviviality and feasting, or some form of eating together. Thus it is common to have commensality for such life crisis celebrations as births and weddings as well as for other kin or communal gatherings, including funerals in some cultures. Kin and communal commensality expresses and reinforces social relations within a social group. Some smaller celebrations may involve family members, while others involve a wider circle of kin and friends or a local community. Communal commensality is often religious and so overlaps with religious commensality celebrated by a local community.

A very common kind of kin commensality is on the occasion of a wedding feast. Wedding feasts are an important event in most communities. Nowadays such feasts are mainly held at restaurants, but before this modern way of holding wedding feasts, people generally held them at home or in a local community. The Chinese in Malaysia, for example, nowadays generally hold the wedding feast at a restaurant as it is considered more prestigious to do so, but in the past, such as in the 1950s, it was common to have wedding feasts at home. This involved relatives coming to the house to prepare food before the wedding, and it was a joyous occasion, with much opportunity for kin to show support by contributing labor and all kinds of assistance, even if the main cooks were hired. In February 1983 I attended a Chinese undergraduate student's wedding at his home in a village in Kelantan, Malaysia (see Figure 2.2). The occasion and the feast brought his relatives together, no doubt reinforcing kin solidarity. Interestingly, among the Malays many in the cities still conduct wedding *kenduri* (feasts) at home. It is not uncommon to find a street in a housing area blocked by tables and chairs under a canvas cover in front of a house. People in Malaysia understand that this is for a Malay wedding feast and drivers will simply drive to another street to find access to one's destination.



Figure 2.2 Chinese wedding, Kelatan, February 1983 (photo: Tan Chee-Beng)

A wedding feast held at home allows much more kin participation. Not all food for a wedding feast held at home need be cooked in the groom's or bride's house. There are many ways of organizing a wedding feast and this is where ethnography can enlighten us. In the case of the Badeng Kenyah in Sarawak, Malaysia, for instance, an important item for wedding commensality or other communal commensality is rice wrapped in a kind of long broad leaf from the plant called *tarit*. As a wedding feast involves a whole community eating together, female relatives organize themselves to make such rice packages in different homes. These are then brought to the longhouse or apartment of the groom and, together with other dishes, are laid out neatly in rows on mats, and the people sit in rows on the floor to eat together. There is much kin and communal participation in a Badeng wedding (see Figure 2.3).

Anthropologists can study how a local community prepares a feast or organizes commensality. The rural Chinese in the New Territories of Hong Kong have an interesting practice that is now well known in anthropological literature. This is *sikh puhn*, which in Cantonese literally means "eating basin," that is, eating from a common pot. This culinary custom was first made well known in anthropology with the publication of an article by James L. Watson in *Anthropos* in 1987 (Watson, 1987), and since then a number of local anthropologists have written about it, too (Cheung, 2005; Chan, S., 2010; Chan, K. S., 2007). Each village in the rural New Territories belongs to a major lineage (bearing a particular surname) the members of



Figure 2.3 Badeng feast, Data Kakus, June 1992 (photo: Tan Chee-Beng)

which organize village banquets on such occasions as weddings and lineage ancestor worship, by having *sikh puhn* commensality. People at each table share a big basin of cooked food comprising of pork, pig skin, chicken, duck, squid, tofu, bean curd sheets, mushrooms, Chinese radish, taro, etc. The guests take the dishes from this basin to eat with rice. The collective dish is called *puhn choi* or "basin dishes." James Watson argues that this way of eating emphasizes equality, as the villagers or lineage members, despite their social status, all eat from the same pot. Nowadays, *sikh puhn* has been promoted by the tourist industry and the media as a unique Hong Kong foodway, and some urban Hong Kong people find it convenient to order *puhn choi* for the Chinese New Year reunion dinner, so there are restaurants that cash in to cook *puhn choi* for the festive occasion (see Figure 2.4).³ Others experience eating *puhn choi*, as pointed out by Selina Chan (2010: 212), as tasting "traditional village culture."

For the Chinese, funerals are also occasions for kin to eat together. In the case of the Cantonese in Hong Kong, after a funeral family members and some close relatives go to a restaurant for a meal together before going home. This is called having *gaai wai jau* or "expelling pollution wine." As the name indicates, it is for symbolically expelling the funeral pollution but it also serves to have the close relatives (siblings, patrilateral uncles and aunts, etc.) together, to console one another, before they



Figure 2.4 Puneet chui. Ping Shan, April 2007 (photo: Tan Chee-Beng)

return to their respective home. Despite the name, the commensals do not necessarily have an alcoholic drink. It is such a standard practice in Hong Kong that restaurants usually have standard sets of menus for such a meal. Cantonese migrants and their descendants in America continue to observe this practice together with its symbolism. In San Francisco, for example, after a funeral the Chinese family and friends go to Chinatown to have such a meal (Crowder, 2005: 217–18).

In the case of the Babas, who conduct funeral rituals at home, the funeral usually takes place on the third day, although it can also be later on the fifth day. During these days, relatives and friends come to express their condolences and, in the evening, pork flavored rice porridge (*bah-be*) is served. On the day of the funeral, if it takes place in the early afternoon, a lunch is served. If the deceased dies of old age, a noodle dish flavored with *sambal nanas* or “pineapple chili salad” is served. The cooked fresh noodles symbolize long life. The salad is made of raw cucumber and pineapple cubes, flavored by a culinary paste made by pounding together some candle nuts (*buah keras*), shrimp paste (*belacan*), red chilies, and salt. Eating with relatives and friends is thus an essential part of such a Chinese funeral.

We note from the above discussion that restaurants have become important sites for organizing commensality. In the modern era, restaurants are common, where food is professionally prepared by chefs. The wealth and status expressed through lavish feasts in the past can today be easily arranged by choosing a particular class

of restaurant (such as a famous one in a five-star hotel) and expensive food served. Thus in many cultures all around the world, wedding feasts and many other kinds of celebrations are increasingly being held in restaurants. It is convenient to do so and is even perceived as prestigious. There is also the practical problem of space in urban living. Nevertheless, as we have seen, there are some families in the city that still prefer to organize wedding feasts at home.

Last we need to note that kin and communal commensality is not always viewed positively. Some individuals may see it as an obligation because attendance or non-attendance is usually viewed as a measure of one's commitment to the kin group or community. Thus not all commensals are willing participants; they attend so as not to be misunderstood as not valuing a relationship or commitment to a group. Maurice Bloch (1999) describes this as a “test” among the Zafimaniry of Madagascar. Among these people there is also the fear of poisoning, and it is advisable to bring a magical antidote to poison when visiting a foreign village (p. 144). Today, in modern societies where there is a strong legal system the fear of attending a commensal meal, if any, is not poisoning by people but food poisoning; that is, it is a health issue. For the Chinese there is always the health issue in a feast when people use their own chopsticks to take food from a common plate or bowl. There have been attempts to encourage the use of *gongkuai*, or serving chopsticks, rather than one's chopsticks to pick food from a common plate. In Hong Kong, as a result of the SARS outbreak in 2003, the use of serving chopsticks has become popular in restaurants and public eating, so much so that it is now an etiquette not to use one's own set of chopsticks to pick food from a common plate. At high-end Chinese restaurants, a diner may even be provided with two sets of chopsticks: one for eating one's food and the other, the *gongkuai*, for picking food from a serving plate or bowl.

Ceremonial and religious commensality

Robertson Smith analyzed feasting in relation to sacrifice and the worship of gods. Whether “the god and his worshippers are commensals” is a matter of perception and context, since in the Chinese worship of deities and ancestors, for instance, the worshippers eat only after the spirits have symbolically eaten. Nevertheless such religious feasting is done to honor the gods, and what is socially significant is that the feasting brings a relevant group of kin or worshippers together. Religion provides the fellowship, which is reinforced by religious commensality. Religious commensality is not only rich in symbolism but also promotes fellowship. Perhaps the most powerful image of such commensality is the Last Supper Jesus Christ had with his disciples. The Christian communion today symbolically stages this commensal union with God. For Muslims everywhere, *Id al-Adha* or the Feast of Sacrifice, which falls on the tenth day of *Dhu-al-Hijja*, the twelfth and last month

of the Muslim calendar, is celebrated with prayer in the mosque and the feasting of food from the animals sacrificed, usually mutton or beef. As it is also the celebration at the end of the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, this is known in the Malay world as Hari Raya Haji, *hari raya* being the Malay word for festival. In China this is known as Guerbang Jie, a term that was derived from Persia and the original Arabic *qurban* for "sacrifice." For the small community of Chinese Muslims in Hong Kong, on which I have done some research, the Muslim festivals like the Mawlid (Prophet Mohammad's birthday, called *Maulud* in Malaysia), the Id al-Adha and the Id al-Fitr (celebration at the end of the fasting month, called *Hari Raya* in Malaysia), are important occasions of commensality and fellowship at their own place of worship.

Among the Chinese in Malaysia, Chinese popular religious practices are both a matter of private and communal worship. In Bukit Rambai village in Malacca, where in 1977 I began my study of the localized Malay-speaking Chinese called "Baba," both the Baba and the non-Baba Chinese in the village honor the Chinese Earth God known locally as *Toa Peh Kong* (literally Big Uncle God) at his communal shrine on the second of the second moon. After all the religious rites have been performed, a feast is held in the afternoon for all members of the religious community. It is a commensality that annually brings the ritual community together. The other communal feast that is organized for religious commensality is that organized in the seventh moon for the celebration of Zhongyuan, which is popularly called the Hungry Ghost Festival.

The Hungry Ghost Festival is known in the Minnan (Hokkien) language as *poodoo* or *pudu* in Mandarin, also known by the Buddhist term *yulan shenghui*. This is an important occasion for communal worship; both in rural communities and in urban wards, to placate the ghosts (the deceased) said to be released from purgatory during the Chinese seventh moon. In Malaysia each Chinese settlement or the Chinese business people in a quarter of an urban center celebrate the occasion on a fixed day in the seventh moon, when the wandering ghosts and the "King of Hell" (*Da Shiye*) are placated and a communal feast is held. The commensality makes the local Chinese organizational structure obvious and reinforces the solidarity of the ritual community. In Quanzhou, Fujian, however, no communal feast is organized after a *pudu* worship, instead each household performs the *pudu* worship separately but at around the same time in each ritual community (based generally on an urban ward). After the worship, some relatives and friends are invited to eat the *pudu* meal together. This kind of commensality is called in Minnan *ziah poodoo* or "eat *poodoo*."

Commensality is an essential part of celebrations. Different cultures have their respective ceremonial commensalities associated with religious observations, which anthropologists can study and describe. The Javanese, for example, are known for their *slamentan*, which Clifford Geertz describes as "perhaps the world's most common religious ritual, the communal feast" (Geertz, 1960: 11). The *slamentan*, small and big, are held for all kinds of life-crisis celebrations, memorial services,

and religious celebrations (cf. Koentjaraningrat, 1985: 546). The ceremonial and religious commensality serves to bring people together as a community, and symbolizes communal and/or religious identification. There are of course overlaps with kin and communal commensality, since many of the latter involve religious rites, too.

Political commensality

Commensality can be organized for a political purpose, and the politics of commensality has been important in human history. In this respect the term "commensal politics" (Dietler, 1996) is useful. It takes little imagination to organize feasts for political purposes, and both histories and fictions have stories of kings and even ordinary people inviting rivals to a meal or feast to have them arrested or poisoned. Rulers had organized feasts to award officials, celebrate victories, or promote alliances. Jacob Wright, in his study of the politics of commensality in ancient Western Asia, shows how rulers used commensality "as one of the most popular means to promote internal social cohesion and forge external alliances" (Wright, 2010a: 212).⁴ This was also true of imperial China, with differences of course; as Yü (1977: 62–70) points out, Han mural paintings contain many feast scenes, including those held in a governor's mansion for his subordinates. There were of course many feasts in the imperial palace. Interestingly, in the case of feasts for visiting foreigners including tributary rulers, there were elaborate rules governing the choice of the wine and food during the Tang dynasty, but the emperor did not eat with the guests (Schafer, 1977: 133). The official banquets in imperial China reflected political power, and there were elaborate rules governing the preparation of feasts for different ranks of officials. During the Song dynasty, for example, palace high officials could be served 11 courses. Third ranked officials "had seven dishes, one box of sweet deep-fried food, and five pitchers of wine" (Freeman, 1977: 166).

Meals can be arranged to express social status and hierarchy. Kings and emperors and noble families had long used feasting to express power and class status. Other than imperial banquets, the Romans also regularly held public banquets in the streets for the ordinary people (Strong, 2002: 37). While the rich and the powerful people today do not hold such big feasts as the kings and emperors did, except in some royal weddings and large wedding banquets in restaurants, the "national feast" has remained important in the conduct of foreign affairs, especially in receiving foreign dignitaries. Who is or is not included is significant in the politics of power and influence as well as status. Even the dishes served and the foodways may be significant, as in the case of President Nixon's use of chopsticks in his visit to China in 1972 to officiate the relationship between the U.S.A. and China. In Belize, during Queen Elizabeth's visit in 1985, the local roast *gibnut* (a kind of large rodent) was served at the Queen's banquet, and the dish became a national pride. It became a

symbol of Belizean national identity (Wilk, 1999). While national banquets today are not organized so much as to forge state-to-state relations or to show lavishness, as the emperors' did, national banquets are highly symbolic to reflect the level of honor that a visiting head of state is given and thus expresses the relations between states and the status of the host state.

Today it is not uncommon for politicians to organize public eating to rally support. They may even use existing forms of communal or religious celebrations to organize commensal eating. In Malaysia, for example, the *hari raya* open house of the Malays has become important for celebrating social relations among the Malays and non-Malays. *Hari raya* is the Malay term for the celebration of "Id al-Fitri" after the fasting month. On the first and subsequent two days of this celebration, Malays, who are Muslims, welcome neighbors and friends, irrespective of ethnicity and religion, to visit them and eat some sweets specially prepared for the celebration. Politicians have also used this open house concept to open their house or official residence to the public. In fact while doing research in Trengganu, Malaysia, in 1987, I found that a Chinese politician in this predominantly Malay state organized a big *buka puasa* (breaking fast) feast in a community center for the Muslims to break fast during the fasting month which precedes the *hari raya* celebration. Here we see a non-Muslim politician using the Muslim practice of breaking fast commensality to organize a political commensality to enhance his support among the Malays. This is not normally done by the non-Muslim politicians elsewhere in Malaysia.

Commensality can be used politically to include or exclude. We are familiar with the famous example of castes: high caste Hindus do not eat with low caste people. Commensality is here used to draw boundaries and to reinforce existing social stratification. We should, however, note that it is the social structure that defines social relations and limits the range of commensality. Such rules of inclusion and exclusion create commensal circles⁵ of people who can eat together. Applied broadly, people of different hierarchy (e.g. social classes) generally have different commensal circles, although the social skill of some individuals allows them to be part of a wide range of commensal circles, such as of both the rich and the poor. In fact commensality can also be used as a political expression to challenge the rule of social exclusion. Such is the case with modern educated Hindu students who wanted to project a modern inclusive Hindu identity by eating together with students of different castes, even as early as the nineteenth century (cf. Roy, 2010: 8). Of course, according to Buddhist accounts, Buddha and his disciples had during their time already challenged the caste stratification by receiving food or having meals with the different castes (Malalasekera and Jayatilleke, 1958). Accepting food and eating together can be a powerful form of resistance to racism and injustice.

Commensality can also be made coercive, and this kind of political commensality is largely ideologically devoid of hospitality. James Watson's discussion of the public mess halls in Maoist China provides a vivid example of this (Watson, 2011). This kind of coercive commensality was not the usual kind of institutional

commensality (cf. Grignon, 2001: 25) as found in hospitals, jails, or boarding schools. It was used by the state to mercilessly attack the family as an intimate form of domestic organization. As Watson (2011: 42) points out, while the Israeli kibbutzim and other small groups have also used collective dining to organize social relations with some success, the one promoted in Maoist China was an extreme form of socialism which attacked the family structure that people considered as important to their life. In a sense this is not real commensality, which generally has some form of hospitality even if it is used politically. Collective dining by force needs to be distinguished from commensality that grows out of social convention or which is based on the value of hospitality.

Today political commensality organized by the state is significant more for its symbolic function than for achieving a concrete political end. However political commensality is important and instrumental in social and business relations. For example, providing a good meal for a government official or business partner can be an important way of forging significant *guanxi* (social relations) to get things done in China. Although there is much emphasis to show hospitality, I treat this as political commensality and distinguish it from what I call hospitality commensality, which we shall now turn to.

Hospitality commensality

Eating together, or taking and receiving the food someone provides (like the children receiving food from the parents), cultivates solidarity or feelings of acceptance. This human experience is easily extended to persons outside the family or friends to show friendship and solidarity. Inviting a non-family member to eat with the family is the highest expression of friendship, and an invitation to share one's food or to eat with one's group, which can be one's family or a kin group or circle of friends, is at the minimum a friendly gesture. Smith highlights this very well in his example of the Arabs who fear that a stranger in a desert may be an enemy, but "if I have eaten the smallest morsel of food with a man, I have nothing further to fear from him" (Smith, 1957 [1889]: 270). Treated to food and eating together over time cultivates a moral relationship of solidarity, which the hospitality obliges one to uphold, albeit there may be cases of betrayal. I call this kind of commensality, hospitality commensality, which is largely an extension of domestic commensality. Hospitality commensality has been important in human history and will continue to be important for establishing social relations.

The extension of family meals to friends is an important principle of expressions of friendship and hospitality. This takes the form of joining family members for a meal or entertaining friends and visitors with food normally eaten at home. Some cultural ways of eating are very convenient for arranging hospitality commensality. A good example of this is the Turkish mixed *kebab* (*karişik*; see Figure 2.5) served

in a big round container from which guests take the large sheets of bread called *lavash*, pieces of mutton, chicken, baked tomato, vegetables, and baked long green chili. A more traditional dish served this way is *marube*, which is rice mixed with meat and vegetables.⁶

For the Chinese nowadays, whether in Malaysia or China, friends are usually entertained in a restaurant. The class of the restaurant and the expensive dishes ordered indicate the extent that the host considers the *guanxi*, or the nature of the relationship. Eating together is expected in the case of friends that one has not met for some time. In some societies, like in the U.S.A., to be invited to eat at someone's house is an honor. In the case of the Chinese, only close friends or relatives may be invited to eat at home, where home cooking is often referred to humbly as *cucha danfan*, literally plain tea and simple food. Honored guests should be treated in restaurants where the host has to pay; the commercial nature of this treat makes it more prestigious than the homely fare.

However, whether eating together at someone's home or not has political and economic dimensions. In Hong Kong, where most people live in small apartments, it is not a common practice to invite friends to have dinner at home. Even extended family members usually meet at a restaurant to eat together. Having dim sum is thus not just having food, it is an arrangement for parents and, for instance, married daughters, daughters-in-law and their children, to meet, such as on Sundays. It is this



Figure 2.5 Bursa, mixed kebab, July 2011 (photo: Tan Chee-Beng)

social significance as well as its connection with Hong Kong identity that *yumcha*, an occasion for drinking tea and eating dim sum, has been studied anthropologically (Tam, 2001). In Malaysia and mainland China, where most people have fairly spacious houses or apartments, it is not uncommon for good friends to drive to each other's house to socialize over tea or a snack. But having an evening eat-out snack (called *xiaoyue* in Chinese) has become an important way friends eat together and socialize in a relaxed public space.

Ethnographically it is interesting to study how people of different cultures extend domestic commensality to show hospitality to friends and even strangers.

I had an interesting experience when I visited a community of Lun Bawang for the first time. This was in June 1989 when I went with a Lun Bawang student to visit some Lun Bawang communities in Limbang, Sarawak, Malaysia. Limbang neighbors Brunei, and this is where many Lun Bawang in Sarawak are to be found today. Once headhunters and known to earlier English writers as Muruts, the people call themselves Lun Bawang while the similar people in Sabah, the other East Malaysia state, call themselves Lun Dayeh. We first arrived in the evening unannounced at a small longhouse community in Long Meringau, where my student had relatives. The people were pleased to see her, whom they had not seen for some time. We were treated to food in an apartment of the host who was closest in relationship to my student. I was hungry and ate a full meal. My student did not eat much and I thought she was too busy catching up with news with the relatives who gathered around us. After the meal we were invited to a second apartment for another meal, and then another apartment, each of which laid out sumptuous food in their respective longhouse apartment, most of whom obviously had cooked more food after our arrival. I then realized that my student had played a cultural trick on me by not warning me that for the Lun Bawang, kin and honored guests were expected to be served food by each apartment, and the visitors had to accept the hospitality. I was touched but I wished I had been told beforehand as I had to try very hard to eat some food served in each apartment. Fortunately it was a longhouse with a few apartments only. Still it was an unforgettable experience, both the hospitality and the pain of forcing oneself to eat on a full stomach.

As anthropologists have observed, the rules of hospitality commensality differ from people to people. Even among the Chinese there are differences between the Chinese of different places. In mainland China, eating together with visitors and friends often involves drinking *baijiu* or spirit. Among many minority *minzu* (minorities as classified by China), drinking rice wine or other spirits is common. Some, like my experience among the Rungus in Sabah, Malaysia, and the Ersu in Sichuan, China, sing toasting songs. While I have mentioned the element of commensalism in most domestic and hospitality commensality, this is not so in all cases. In Japan, commensality among friends at a restaurant generally involves each sharing the cost of the food. This is unlike the Chinese among whom there is a host to pay for the food.

We have seen that commensality or non-commensality can be a way of drawing boundaries between groups. In the case of *sama makan* and *tak sama makan*, mentioned earlier, this is not so much of using commensality to include or exclude. It is a rhetoric that reflects how food taboo can affect social interaction. The Orang Asli do not use an ideology of commensality to exclude the Malays. It is the Muslim food taboo on pork and the rule of consuming the meat of animals that have been slaughtered according to Muslim law. This makes it difficult for Muslims to eat the food prepared by non-Muslims, especially if the Muslim food taboo is not observed. Nevertheless, Muslims and non-Muslims can still eat together if the Muslim food taboo is taken into account, such as eating in a *halal* restaurant, or at a vegetarian restaurant. Studying commensality in different cultures is not only a lens to see how social relations are conducted and the cultural views involved. It also helps to identify ways to promote intercultural understanding.

Conclusions

The discussion above shows that it is convenient to think of various levels and categories of commensality. Domestic commensality is most basic, and what is called hospitality commensality in social relations may be considered as an extension of domestic commensality. Kin and communal commensality is significant at a communal level, while religious commensality is organized for a local community or religious community. Political commensality is very broad since commensality can be organized by ordinary people and by the state for political purposes. Feasts are important when considering political commensality. They are not only important for communal celebration; they are also useful for forging solidarity and alliances and consolidating power as well as expressing power and status. In this respect, it is useful to note Michael Dietler's analysis of feasts by classifying them into empowering feasts, which emphasizes "the manipulation of commensal hospitality towards the acquisition and maintenance of certain forms of symbolic capital, and sometimes economic capital as well"; patron-client feasts; and diacritical feasts (Dietler, 2001). The latter two feasts seek to maintain existing power relations, with the diacritical feasts using expensive or exotic foods, elaborate serving utensils and distinguished settings to reflect class and aesthetics.

I should like to further discuss hospitality commensality as an institutionalized way of expressing the value of hospitality, because it has been important for organizing human interaction. Hospitality through the medium of food and eating together is a value that is still important for the conduct of social relations with friends and relatives. Given the increasing globalization and global encounters, what I call hospitality commensality is even more important. To have a cross-cultural and cross-national experience in commensality is a very special experience that is both local and cosmopolitan. In fact there is also a need to prepare this kind of

commensality experience for tourists and people who wish to be a part of a local community, albeit temporarily as foreign visitors. For example, to eat together with a Turkish host over a large tray of mixed *kebab* is a very special experience that immediately brings foreign visitors close to the Turkish people and local culture, albeit it involves meeting only a few Turkish people. Food and commensality have the immediate effect of bringing the local culture to the visitors. Thus certain local ways of commensality have important potential for organizing tourism and cross cultural contacts.

The significance of commensality, which will continue to be with us into the future, is that it is not just the significance of eating together; it is the expression of the value of hospitality, of expressing care and love or of valuing a relationship. This institution of hospitality has helped in human social evolution in organizing and maintaining social relations beyond the domestic unit or a small human group. It continues to be useful for organizing social relations in this even more globalized and cosmopolitan world. Commensality understood this way is a way of inclusion in a human world that is differentiated by ethnicity, and nationality, religion, and class. Anthropologists inspired by Claude Levi-Strauss have since long paid attention to the function of marriage in promoting alliances. This might be important in past human societies; today few people arrange marriage to promote alliance between human groups, although the kin relations so formed are expressed and reinforced in commensality for in-laws. Hospitality commensality has wider significance for friendship and for establishing as well as maintaining social networks. After all, food rather than sex can be consumed together with a group of people at the same time for promoting friendship and social relations. Commensality provides the embodied experience of social relations with people. Our discussion shows that commensality is not just a simple fact of eating together; it is a lens to study culture and social relations.