

# Feasts

ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND  
ETHNOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVES  
ON FOOD, POLITICS, AND POWER

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3

## THEORIZING THE FEAST

RITUALS OF CONSUMPTION, COMMENSAL POLITICS, AND  
POWER IN AFRICAN CONTEXTS

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“Feast” is an analytical rubric used to describe forms of ritual activity that involve the communal consumption of food and drink. Rituals of this kind play many important social, economic, and political roles in the lives of peoples around the world. As the chapters in this volume attest, recognition of this fact has been growing rapidly among archaeologists recently, along with the fertile insights that feasts may offer in understanding social relations and processes in ancient societies. I would suggest that one of the reasons that a focus on feasting is, in fact, crucial to archaeology is that it constitutes part of a central domain of social action that has been largely absent from archaeological analysis to date, much to our detriment. Discussions of the transformation of political systems, for example, have tended rather crudely to link broad evolutionary processes to general

structural typologies without considering the intervening kinds of social practices by which people actually negotiate relationships, pursue economic and political goals, compete for power, and reproduce and contest ideological representations of social order and authority. Hence, there has been a general failure to deal effectively with issues of agency and to understand the ways in which practice transforms structure.

In my view, it is essential for archaeologists to come to grips with the arenas of social action in which, and the sets of practices by which, the micropolitics of daily life are played out. This is the only way we will move beyond mechanistic typological reductionism in understanding historical transformations of various relations of power and in addressing such perennial issues as the development of social stratification and political centralization. For example, it is undoubtedly important to nuance our understanding of complex political structures with taxonomic distinctions, such as that between hierarchy and heterarchy raised by Crumley (1987); but it is equally important to attempt to understand the practices by which individuals create, maintain, and contest positions of power and authority within systems structured in these ways and, in the pursuit of their conflicting interests, transform the structures of the systems themselves. Put in simpler terms, we need to think seriously and realistically about political life as it is lived and experienced if we are to fill our analytical categories with meaningful content and advance beyond mechanistic structural correlations, vague pronouncements about overdetermined social processes, and sweeping evolutionist teleologies.

### FEASTS, POLITICS, AND ARCHAEOLOGY

There has been much written recently about the need to develop a practice-oriented approach in archaeology, but rather few coherent suggestions or effective demonstrations of how this can be accomplished. This is one of the principal attractions of a focus on feasts. Although as yet curiously underacknowledged, the "commensal politics" of feasting is a domain of political action that is both extremely important on a worldwide scale and potentially accessible to archaeological analysis (Dietler 1990, 1996, 1999a; Hayden 1990, 1996). Indeed, I would contend both that feasts are inherently political and that they constitute a fundamental instrument and theater of political relations. In making this statement, let me explicitly emphasize that I manifestly do not mean to make the naive reductionist argument that feasts are *only* about power; nor do I mean that they are the only significant domain of political action. Far from it. But they are commonly an important arena for the representation and manipulation of political relations, and it behooves us to explore critically this dimension of such a widespread cultural institution. However, before we are able to fully exploit this promising av-

enue of analysis, we need not only a greater range of empirical information about the diagnostic characteristics of feasts, but, most crucially, a more developed theoretical understanding of the nature of feasts as a distinctive kind of ritual practice. Ultimately, it is only through the latter that we will be able to comprehend and exploit the former. This is by no means a simple or straightforward proposition: it requires detailed, careful, and subtle analytical exploration and argumentation.

As noted above, I define feasts explicitly as a form of public ritual activity centered around the communal consumption of food and drink. Let me immediately anticipate a common misunderstanding of this definition by some archaeologists and make clear that identifying feasts as ritual activity does not mean that they are necessarily highly elaborate ceremonies. A ritual act can be as simple as making the sign of the cross upon entering a church, pouring a few drops of beer on the threshold of a house as a libation, or throwing a small wine and cheese reception for a visiting anthropologist who has just presented a colloquium lecture. Moreover, as the last example suggests, rituals need not necessarily be "sacred" in character (Moore and Myerhoff 1985). The defining criterion of rituals is that they are in some way symbolically differentiated from everyday activities in terms of forms of action or purpose: in Kertzer's (1988:9) phrase, they are "action wrapped in a web of symbolism." More will be said about this later. For the moment, let me simply assert that, as with other types of ritual, feasts provide an arena for both the highly condensed symbolic representation and the active manipulation of social relations. Moreover, as a particular form of ritual in which food and drink constitute the medium of expression and commensal consumption constitutes the basic symbolic idiom, feasts have some distinctive properties (which, again, will be discussed in more detail later).<sup>1</sup>

In earlier publications, I used comparative ethnographic data to develop a theoretical discussion of several major political dimensions of feasting ritual, with distinctions based upon a consideration of the conjuncture of the different political roles played by feasts and the nature of their symbolic action. These different modes of commensal politics were labeled "entrepreneurial," "patron-role," and "diacritical" feasts, and I used different contexts in prehistoric Europe to illustrate how the application of this perspective can aid archaeological understanding of ancient societies (see Dietler 1990, 1996, 1998, 1999a, 1999b). In this chapter I use a variety of ethnographic evidence from African agrarian societies to emend and further elucidate these theoretical constructs and explore their utility for archaeological interpretation.<sup>2</sup>

I focus upon Africa for several reasons. The most obvious reason is that I have firsthand experience of it from having spent several years conducting ethnographic research there.<sup>3</sup> More important than mere personal familiarity, how-

ever, is the fact that Africa is the ethnographic terrain that really gave birth to political anthropology as a field (Amselle 1998:58; Moore 1994). Because so much research during the colonial era was pragmatically driven from an early date by attempts to understand the operation of politics in both myriad stateless societies and the large centralized kingdoms that were encountered (e.g., Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940; Middleton and Tait 1958), the African literature is unusually rich in comparative observations on, and insights into, structures of power and the operation of politics in daily life. Moreover, despite the obvious cautious source criticism necessary in negotiating much of the earlier structural-functionalist political work, Africanists have remained at the vanguard of political analysis and the theoretical exploration of power. Hence, Africa does offer an especially promising context for investigating the political dimension of feasting.

But there is more. Africa is also of interest because it has frequently been singled out by scholars as presenting some intriguingly distinctive characteristics in the realm of food and politics. This is, after all, the continent that was designated by Goody (1982) as the prototypic land without "cuisine." His book *Cooking, Cuisine, and Class* was largely dedicated to explaining why African societies, even the highly stratified kingdoms, had not developed the kind of markedly differentiated culinary practices that characterize Europe and China. I hasten to add that one should be wary of Goody's rather sweeping regional generalizations, but they do point to some interesting theoretical issues that are important for understanding the archaeological interpretation of feasting. Likewise, several scholars have recently suggested both that the nature of power in Africa differs fundamentally from that in "the West" (in that it is centered more around consumption than around "transformation," that is, the capacity to consume rather than the ability to get people to do things: Schatzberg 1993:446), and that it is inseparably associated with metaphors of food and its consumption (see Bayart 1993; Lentz 1998; Schatzberg 1993). Again, Lentz (1998) quite rightly cautions against accepting such broad generalizations and reifications, pointing out the tremendous diversity of political practices, strategies, and moral philosophies of power in Africa. But, whether one ultimately accepts these arguments for African exceptionalism or not, what such examples indicate is that African societies do furnish a challenging context in which to examine and refine theoretical constructs concerning feasting and politics derived from broader surveys of ethnographic data.

### FEASTS AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY

Before undertaking a more detailed analysis of the micropolitical dimensions of feasting ritual, or what may be labeled "commensal politics," I will begin with the general observation that in Africa, as elsewhere, feasts serve a wide variety of important structural roles in the broader political economy. They create and main-

tain social relations that bind people together in various intersecting groups and networks on a wide range of scales, from the local household cluster to the regional political community. For example, they are extremely important in establishing sentiments of friendship, kinship, and community solidarity, as well as in cementing bonds between affine groups and political links between leaders of various kinds. In this sense, they may be seen to perform, at a variety of scales, the classic integrative function of creating *communitas*, which was identified by earlier functionalist analysts of ritual (see especially Turner 1969). Unfortunately, the relatively limited considerations of feasting by archaeologists have tended not to penetrate much beyond this level until quite recently. As later discussion will demonstrate, a more productive political analysis of feasting must also explore the complex contradictory processes and tensions simultaneously operating in feasting ritual. However, it is important to acknowledge this integrative function which, among other things, enables feasts to act frequently as the nodal contexts that articulate regional exchange systems: commensal hospitality establishes relationships between exchange partners, affines, or political leaders and provides the social ambiance for the exchange of valuables, bridewealth, and other goods that circulate through a region. Feasts may also provide the main context for the arbitration of disputes, the passing of legal judgments, and the public acting out of sanctions (ridicule, mimicry, ostracism, etc.) that maintain social control within a community. In the important religious sphere, feasts also serve to provide links to the gods or ancestors that can also be used to define the structure of relations between social groups or categories within a region or community. They also provide a crucial mechanism for the process of labor mobilization that underlies the political economy and they serve to articulate conversions between spheres of exchange (see Chapter 9).

Examples of these features are ubiquitous in the anthropological and historical literature on Africa. But, important as these features are, a proper analysis of feasting must move beyond functional consideration of such general structural roles to examine the dynamic nature of feasts as privileged ritual sites of political and economic practice, to show in detail how and why they work, and to demonstrate how feasts are implicated in social change.

### FEASTS AS RITUAL, RITUAL AS POLITICS

As noted earlier, feasts are defined as public ritual events of communal food and drink consumption. This means that they differ in some way from daily consumption practices; but at the same time, the ritual symbolism of feasts is constituted through a complex semiotic relationship to daily consumption patterns, and both form part of a common semiotic field (see Douglas 1984; Elias 1978). To adapt a concept from linguistic analysis, feasts may be viewed as the "marked"

form to the "unmarked" meal. To illustrate this idea through a simple example, the "communion" event of the Catholic mass may be seen as essentially a feast involving the ritual distribution and consumption of bread and wine. The meaning of this consumption event both derives from and plays upon its original meaning in the context of daily meals, but is, at the same time, dramatically transformed by the symbolic framing devices that distinguish the mass as a theater of ritual action. Of course, quotidian meals are also, to a certain extent, "ritualized" events in that they are highly structured sequences of action that serve to shape the "habitus" (Bourdieu 1990) of individuals (inculcating dispositions guiding practice and naturalizing the social order) and their constituent elements can be manipulated subtly to make political statements (Appadurai 1981). But they differ from more formal ritual "feast" events in being generally less consciously public performances. The ways in which feasts are symbolically marked as distinct from daily practice are variable, and extremely important for archaeologists to understand. More will be said about this later. For the moment, it is important to recognize that this relationship between feasts and daily meals is crucial both to understanding the symbolic significance of feasts and to our very ability to identify feasting archaeologically.

At this point, it is necessary to expand the discussion slightly and set feasts in a broader theoretical context by saying a few words about the emerging anthropological understanding of the nature of ritual in general and its relationship to politics and power. One consistently common feature of recent views in cultural anthropology is a rejection of assumptions that continue to underlie many archaeological interpretations: that ritual is a straightforward reflection of social and political structure and/or an inconsequentially epiphenomenal aspect of the "superstructure" of society. The older Durkheimian functionalist view of ritual as an adaptive mechanism (a kind of all-purpose adhesive substance) for the maintenance of social solidarity (or "system equilibrium," in the terminology of one of the more archaeologically popular versions of functionalism) is also now generally recognized to be a partial and flawed understanding. This is not to deny or ignore that rituals frequently serve to create and reproduce a sense of *communitas* (Turner 1969; van Gennep 1960). But anthropological understanding of the symbolic work of ritual has moved well beyond this feature, and attention has now turned to the historically instrumental role of ritual in creating, defining, and transforming structures of power.

The relationship between ritual and politics is seen to be an intimate one: to paraphrase one recent review of the subject, there is no ritual without politics and no politics without ritual (Kelly and Kaplan 1990:141). However, this relationship is also a complex one that has generated an extensive, and often contentious, literature in anthropology (cf. Apter 1992; Bell 1996; Bloch 1989; Cohen 1979; Co-

maroff and Comaroff 1991, 1993; Kelly and Kaplan 1990; Kertzer 1988; Tambiah 1985; Turner 1969). In this latter vein, many scholars (e.g., Bloch 1989) see ritual as essentially a conservative authoritarian force that acts to mystify asymmetrical relations of power, while others (e.g., Apter 1992; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 1993; Kertzer 1988) view it as an important historical force for both the reproduction and the transformation of relations of power. This latter, more fluid, practice-oriented perspective approaches ritual as an instrument of both domination and resistance, as an arena for the symbolic naturalization, mystification, and contestation of authority. It should go without saying, but let me reiterate an earlier caveat by noting that, in treating the political dimension of ritual, one is not attempting to reduce rituals, such as feasts, to an activity that is *only* about politics. There is clearly a lot more of considerable significance going on. But rituals and politics are inseparably linked in ways that are important to understand.

The effectiveness of ritual in this domain stems from several features. As Cohen (1979) has noted, the most emotionally compelling and effective political symbols are those that are not overtly political but rather tend to have an ambiguous "bivocality" melding intense personal experience of existential identity issues with broader structures of power. By "condensing meaning" in this way, ritual symbolism infuses social norms and categories with emotion (Turner 1967:29). This is one reason that traumatic life-crisis events, such as death, so commonly serve as a major ritual arena for the manipulation of political symbolism (Morris 1992). The emotional power of rituals also stems from certain theatrical media and sensory mechanisms commonly employed (in various combinations) in performance that tend to frame ritual as symbolically pregnant action marked off from other kinds of daily practice, thus focusing people's attention and rendering them receptive to episodes of heightened emotional experience. These devices include such things as music, dancing, rhythmic verse, role acting, evocative staging and costumes, and intoxication. Dramaturgical techniques such as the creation of images through contrast and the dialectical resolution of contradictions merge emotional catharsis with important pedagogical functions. Symbolic references to the past are commonly invoked to create an impression of seamless continuity, and highly formalized, repetitive sequences of action serve to limit the perception of alternatives and to naturalize the projected order by linking it to the "natural" experience of the passage of time (cf. Bloch 1989; Dietler and Herbich 1993; Moore and Myerhoff 1985; Tambiah 1985; Turner 1967).

Like all ritual, feasts provide a site and a medium for the highly condensed symbolic representation of social relations. However, again as with other ritual, they express idealized concepts: the way people *believe* relations exist, or should exist, rather than how they are necessarily manifested in daily activity. Such representations may either camouflage, naturalize, or contest asymmetries of

power, and struggles over the control of representations and their interpretation by differentially situated actors are an important site of historical change. However, in addition to this idealized representation of the social order, rituals also offer the potential for manipulation by individuals or groups attempting to alter or make statements about their relative position within that social order as it is perceived, presented, and contested. As such, feasts are subject to simultaneous manipulation for both ideological and more immediately personal goals. In other words, individuals can use feasts to compete against each other without questioning a shared vision of the social order that the feast reproduces and naturalizes, or they can use feasts to simultaneously struggle for personal position and promote contrasting visions of the proper structure of the social world.

Feasts are a particularly powerful form of ritual activity that also have the pragmatic virtue of being potentially visible in the archaeological record. Because of their inherent emotive and symbolic power, feasts are very often intimately embedded in *rites de passage* or life-crisis ceremonies, such as funerals; and it is this feature that often renders them archaeologically detectable as distinct events. Moreover, the culinary nature of feasts generally necessitates the use of containers for both preparation and consumption. Very frequently, over the past 10,000 years of human history at least, a substantial portion of these containers has tended to be made of ceramic or metal, which preserve extremely well in the archaeological record even when broken. Detecting feasts in the Paleolithic is, of course, considerably more difficult (see Dietler 1996; Marshall 1993; Perlès 1996); and the political dimensions of feasting are somewhat different among forager societies (see Hayden, Chapter 2; Wiessner 1996) than among the agrarian societies discussed here.

The previously asserted potency of feasts as a particular form of ritual activity derives from the fact that food and drink serve as the media of expression and commensal hospitality constitutes the syntax in the context of a ritual of consumption. Food and drink are highly charged symbolic media because they are “embodied material culture”: that is, a special form of material culture produced specifically for ingestion into the body. They are a basic and continual human physiological need, which are also a form of “highly condensed social fact” (see Appadurai 1981:494) embodying relations of production and exchange and linking the domestic and political economies in a highly personalized way. Moreover, although eating and drinking are among the few biologically essential acts, they are never simply biological acts. Rather, they are learned “techniques du corps” (Mauss 1935)—culturally patterned techniques of bodily comportment that are expressive in a fundamental way of identity and difference. Alcoholic beverages frequently have a privileged role in the feasting context because they are essentially food with certain psychoactive properties resulting from an alternative

means of preparation that tend to amplify their significance in the important dramaturgical aspects of ritual (Dietler 1990). Moreover, this property of fermentation as a quasi-magical transformation of food into a substance that, in turn, transforms human consciousness augments the symbolic value of alcohol in the common liminal aspects of rituals.

Both food and drink are also a highly perishable form of good, the full politico-symbolic potential of which is realized in the drama of public-consumption events that constitute a prime arena for the reciprocal conversion of what Bourdieu (1990) metaphorically calls “symbolic capital” and economic capital. Public distribution and consumption of a basic need derives added symbolic salience from its demonstration of confidence and managerial skill in the realm of production. More importantly, however, consumption is played out in the extremely powerful idiom of commensal hospitality. I believe this feature is crucial to understanding the political dimensions of feasts, and it is for this reason that I have chosen to emphasize what I have called “commensal politics.”

Anigbo has asserted that “Commensality is not essentially about expressing love or intimacy” (1996:101–102), because it is clear that even individuals aggressively opposed to each other may use commensality to define their relationship. However, commensality is a powerfully expressive trope of intimacy that creates and reproduces relationships capable of encompassing sustained aggressive competition by effectively euphemizing it in a symbolic practice that encourages collective misrecognition of the self-interested nature of the process. And as Bourdieu has pointed out

In the work of reproducing established relations—feasts, ceremonies, exchange of gifts, visits or courtesies, and, above all, marriages—which is no less vital to the existence of the group than the reproduction of the economic bases of its existence, the labour required to conceal the function of the exchanges is as important as the labour needed to perform this function. (1990:112)

Hence, one begins to glimpse the symbolic force at the heart of commensal rituals. Feasts act as a form of symbolic “metaproduction,” constituting and euphemizing broader social relations in terms of the basic commensal unit.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, commensal hospitality may be viewed as a specialized form of gift exchange that establishes the same relations of reciprocal obligation between host and guest as between donor and receiver in the exchange of other more durable types of objects (Mauss 1966). The major difference is that food is destroyed in the act of commensal consumption at a feast; and, moreover, destroyed by ingesting it into the body. This is a literal “embodiment” or “incorporation” of the gift and the social debt that it engenders. Aside from the powerful symbolic dimension of this practice, it also results in the pragmatic fact

that, unlike durable valuables, the food consumed cannot be recirculated (or "reinvested") in other gift-exchange relationships: food must be produced anew through agricultural and culinary labor in order to fulfill reciprocal obligations.

A clarification should be raised here, however, because food can also be used for nondestructive exchange in the same fashion as durable valuables. In contrast to the prepared food consumed at feasts, this food may be either raw (e.g., yams, sacks of flour), processed (e.g., cooked or smoked meat), or even live potential food (e.g., chickens, goats, cattle). In the case of live animals, in particular, the potential for long-term reinvestment is obvious; but even the more perishable forms may be quickly redeployed to a certain extent in other local exchange networks or in subsequent commensal hospitality. The exchange of food in this manner may take place completely outside of a commensal-consumption context that one would properly call a feast; or a feast may serve as the arena for such exchanges. In the latter case, different kinds of foods may sometimes be used for the feast and the exchange transaction. Although both of the two political uses of food described above (commensal consumption and nondestructive gift exchange) may take place at feasts, it is important for the analytical purposes of this discussion that the distinction between them not be obscured by subsuming them both under the general term *feasting*. They are not the same thing (Dietler 1996).

Commensal consumption (which, to reiterate, is here taken to be a definitive attribute of feasts) places obvious limitations on the possibilities of the guest/receiver to redeploy the food (s)he has received in the fulfillment of reciprocal obligations of other exchange relationships: it removes goods permanently and immediately from circulation. It is thus a more temporally restrictive use of food in manipulating social relations than is the nondestructive exchange pattern that may or may not accompany a feast. Because of the commensal aspect, it is also a potentially even more subtle manipulation.

The critical point to retain is that commensal hospitality centering on food and drink distribution and consumption is a practice, which, like the exchange of gifts, serves to establish and reproduce social relations. This is why feasts are often viewed as mechanisms of social solidarity that serve to establish a sense of community. However, as Mauss (1966) long ago pointed out, these are relations of reciprocal obligation that simultaneously serve to create and define differences in status. The relationship of giver to receiver, or host to guest, translates into a relationship of social superiority and inferiority unless and until the equivalent can be returned. "As the Bemba [of Zambia] say, 'You have eaten *namba* (the sticky gum from the *munamba* tree) and it sticks to your stomach'. . . i.e., you have filled your stomach with food from some one and it puts you under a permanent obligation to him" (Richards 1939:135). In this feature, the potential of hospitality to be manipulated as a tool in defining social relations, lies the crux of

commensal politics. The hospitality of feasting is, of course, only one of many potential fields of political action that may be variably articulated. As will be shown in more detail in the later discussion of the Luo case, feasting may be strategically used by individuals either to complement or to compete against forms of prestige and power derived from other domains of competition for symbolic capital, such as warfare, magic, gift giving, public oratory, etc. (cf. Bourdieu 1990; Lemonnier 1990; Modjeska 1982). However, the special attribute of feasting is that, because of the intimate nature of the practice of sharing food and the symbolic power of the trope of commensality, of all forms of gift prestation it is perhaps the most effective at subtly euphemizing the self-interested nature of the process and creating a shared "sincere fiction" (in Bourdieu's apt phrase) of disinterested generosity.

### MODES OF COMMENSAL POLITICS

I will now turn to some selected African empirical contexts in order to further explicate several previously defined theoretical constructs: specifically, three different modes of commensal politics, or general patterns in the ways that feasts operate symbolically in serving as sites and instruments of politics (Dietler 1996). One can, of course, propose a variety of more or less useful classifications of feasts based upon a range of criteria, such as scale of inclusion (household, neighborhood, community, etc.), specific cultural context (funerary feasts, marriage feasts, initiation feasts, etc.), or manifest and latent social and economic functions (religious feasts, labor feasts, community celebrations, etc.; see Hayden 1996 and various chapters in this volume for some alternative classifications). However, the value of a classification is entirely relative to the problem it is intended to solve.

The distinctions outlined here are analytical constructs designed to further understanding of the specific problem of the political dimensions of feasting ritual. As will become clear in the discussion to follow, a concept such as the "empowering feast" crosscuts many of the other potential categories noted above because it highlights the ways that certain political processes are operative in all these apparently different feasting contexts. Hence, I am not really proposing here a typology of "kinds of feasts" that can be linked directly to, for example, certain patterned deposits of archaeological material (insofar as that might be possible). Rather, I am attempting a heuristic dissection of the politico-symbolic dimension of feasting as an institution. The application of insights derived from this analysis to the archaeological record must always rely upon complex contextual arguments that accommodate the specific cultural conditions of a given case (see Dietler 1990, 1996, 1999a).

The first of these three modes of commensal politics to be analyzed is directed



toward the acquisition or creation of social (and economic) power and the latter two are directed toward the maintenance of existing inequalities in power relations. The first two operate primarily through an emphasis on quantity, and the last operates through an emphasis on style. The first two work through the idiom of donor/receiver, superiority/subordination relations within an inclusive binding exchange dyad, whereas the latter works through the idiom of diacritical exclusion in an insider/outsider relationship.

### EMPOWERING FEASTS

The first of these feast patterns, which I call the "empowering feast," involves the manipulation of commensal hospitality toward the acquisition and maintenance of certain forms of symbolic capital, and sometimes economic capital as well. The term covers a range of symbolic consumption practices that are instrumental in negotiating social positioning. In previous publications (Dietler 1996, 1999a), I have referred to this category as the "entrepreneurial feast," but subsequent discussions have led me to believe that this term has the potential to create some misunderstanding. It was intended simply as a convenient trope, but runs the risk of being interpreted literally as a sort of crude neoclassical economic concept. The change in terminology also, I believe, helps to underline the fact that I am not attempting to distinguish a type of specialized feast involving openly aggressive competitive contests (as distinct from, for example, a "harmonious egalitarian" community celebration). Rather, I use the more passive term "empowering" as a way to indicate an effective political role of feasting events of various kinds rather than necessarily an overt intention of the hosts. Although this role is sometimes fully, or at least partially, recognized by the participants, much of the effectiveness of this political mechanism derives from the fact that it often entails a kind of collective misrecognition or euphemization of the self-interested nature of the practice. It involves what Bourdieu characterizes as a "sincere fiction of disinterested exchange" (1990:112). Indeed, a major part of Bourdieu's argument about habitus is that the skill and grace of the genuinely competent social actor relies upon that actor being unaware of the principles that inform his or her actions. Awareness arises in the context of mistakes, of alternative actions that raise uncertainties about precisely how one should act. Although the limited role of consciousness in social action is an aspect of Bourdieu's work that is perhaps overstated and subject to some question and criticism, nevertheless, I believe that he is correct in identifying the euphemization of self-interest as an important aspect of ritualized forms of exchange, such as feasts.

Another preliminary preemptive disclaimer is necessary to clarify the fact that I have previously referred to empowering feasts as a domain of inherent social "competition" (Dietler 1990, 1996). This word also has the potential to give rise to

misunderstandings, particularly in traversing linguistic frontiers in which the cultural coding of the term differs.<sup>5</sup> Hence, let me reiterate that in using the term *competitive* I am manifestly not referring only to activities that involve an overt agonistic challenge to monopolize power, with resulting explicit "winners" and "losers." I have something more subtle in mind than the ideology of free-market capitalism or football! Nor am I referring only to feasts that involve an escalating scale of ostentatious reciprocal hospitality (of the well known New Guinea "big-man" type: see Lemonnier 1990, 1996).

Rather, I mean that feasts are inherently *political*, but with an understanding of power in the sense it has acquired in the wake of work by Bourdieu (1990), Foucault (e.g., 1980), and others: as a *relational* phenomenon rather than as a limited good. Hence, the symbolic capital realized through empowering feasting is an inherently "competitive" phenomenon in that it describes conditions of *relative* asymmetries in relationships between people, and, moreover, asymmetries that must be renegotiated continually through symbolic practices. This "competition" is not necessarily one that strives toward aggressive domination and relentless accumulation of power: it is often simply one of maintaining status among peers or of defining one's peers. Nor is it necessarily one that directs an explicit challenge to particular individuals or groups: it often involves simply a positive affirmation of the prestige of the host and his/her group that implicates others only in a relative, indirect, general sense. There is clearly a significant difference between, for example, maintaining friendly reciprocal obligations with one's neighbors in hosting small beer parties and the agonistic attempts by New Guinea big-men to crush their rivals with hospitality. There are generally culturally specific behavioral sanctions and moral philosophies of legitimate power that restrict the escalation of such commensal practices and assure that cases of the latter extreme form are fairly unusual. But some degree of competition is involved in all these empowering feast contexts. Those who do not keep up fall behind. Such practices always affect the *relative* status and influence of participants and the quality of relationships. In this sense, commensal politics is always competitive in its effects, even though the political implications may be subtle, limited, and thoroughly euphemized.

Consequently, it must also be recognized that, for example, feasts conceived sincerely by the participants as harmonious celebrations of community identity and unity are *simultaneously* arenas for manipulation and the acquisition of prestige, social credit, and the various forms of influence, or informal power, that symbolic capital entails. These are not mutually exclusive functions that require, or even enable, one to assign a given feast event to one of two alternative categories (e.g., solidarity vs. competitive). Rather, one must recognize the complex political polysemy of feasts. They both unite and divide *at the same time*. They si-

multaneously define relationships and boundaries. This feature may well entail certain structural contradictions of interest, but it does not necessarily result in conflict, or even the perception of incongruity, in the course of practice.

Finally, let me also emphasize that, in treating the political dimension of things such as religious feasts, I am manifestly not attempting to make a vulgar reductionist argument of the bottom-line "practical reason" variety. I do not wish to reduce the participants to unidimensional cynical manipulators and deny their religious sincerity and the affective motivational force of religious belief. Quite the contrary. Rather, I believe this is an issue of audience: it must be remembered that all rituals, including feasts, have simultaneous multiple audiences. Religious feasts, for example, are clearly directed at communicating with gods, ancestors, or spiritual forces: they are a sincere attempt to "bring them to the table," so to speak. But they are simultaneously directed toward an audience of living humans, and perhaps several groups or categories of living humans. Feasts are polysemous, in terms of audience, motivation, and forms of empowerment. Concentrating on an analysis of the political should not be interpreted as a denial of the importance of other dimensions.

Symbolic capital translates into an ability to influence group decisions or actions. This influence derives from the relations created and reproduced in the process of personal interaction. In the case of feasting, those are multiple relations of reciprocal obligation and temporary sentiments of social asymmetry between host and guests created through displays of hospitality. The "power" derived from this sort of commensal politics may range from a subtle and temporary affirmation of elevated status (such as attitudes of gratitude or deference) to demands for special rights and leading managerial roles in group decisions. In societies without formal specialized political roles, hosting feasts is very often a major means of acquiring and maintaining the respect and prestige necessary to exercise leadership. It does not create the power to command, but it does imbue individuals with the moral authority that is a necessary condition to exert persuasive influence.

In societies where institutionalized political roles or formal status distinctions exist, but without fixed hereditary rules for determining who may fill them, hosting feasts is often the means by which individuals assume and hold these roles and statuses. In all such cases, this kind of power is continually being renegotiated, sustained, and contested through commensality. This form of commensal politics has been described by various anthropologists in many contexts across Africa (not to mention the Pacific, Latin America, Asia, and the rest of the world). Among the Yoruba of Nigeria, for example, men move up the social hierarchy by taking titles. This is accomplished by displays of prestige in feasts furnished with large quantities of beer or palm-wine (Obayemi 1976). Among the

Dorze of Ethiopia, assumption of the title of *balak'a* and its elevated political status requires the hosting of feasts so lavish that there is even some reluctance to undertake the initiation procedure (Halperin and Olmstead 1976). Similarly, among the Koma of Cameroon, there is a formalized age-grade system that leads to the possibilities for individuals to become high-ranking initiates and respected makers of policy within the village as they progressively gain access to more secret religious knowledge with each step. Moving up through this system requires the sponsorship of special feasts known as "cattle dances" that are held by a man to honor his wife and are fueled with a great deal of millet and sorghum beer and beef. These can be held by a man only six or seven times in a lifetime, and the ability to hold such a feast is decided by fellow villagers who judge whether an individual has acquired the necessary symbolic and economic capital for the rank to which he aspires. There are, of course, many other feasting contexts for acquiring personal prestige that are not tied directly to the age-grade structure. These include beer parties hosted for gatherings on market days, for work feasts, and for various ritual activities (Gariné 1996).

In societies with an egalitarian political ethos, the self-interested manipulative nature of the process may be concealed or euphemized by the fact that it is carried out through the socially valued and integrated institution of generous hospitality, and it may even be perceived by the participants as a leveling device. However, this apparent leveling is, in a sense, merely the conversion of economic capital into symbolic capital. In fact, feasts may be used as a form of what Firth (1983) has called "indebtedness engineering" every bit as much as the prestation of valuables. This is quite clear in the cases where feasting is recognized by the participants to be openly aggressive, as with the escalating beer feasts between exchange partners among the Mambila of Nigeria where the failure to return a yet more copious feast results in jeering and ridicule (Rehfishch 1987). But it can be equally operative in cases where competitive manipulation is more subtly euphemized and where there is no escalation of prestation.

Commensal hospitality may be manipulated in the empowering feast pattern for economic advantage as well as for political power, especially through the institution of the "work feast"; and this was particularly true of societies in the past. As this institutionalized practice is more thoroughly analyzed elsewhere in this volume (see Chapter 9), I will simply note here that the "work feast" is a form of labor mobilization practice found throughout Africa (and indeed, around the world). It constitutes one pole in a continuum of labor mobilization practices, here called "collective work events" (CWE), for which the other pole is the "work exchange." The work feast is an event in which a group of people is called together to work on a specific project for a day and the participants are then treated to food and/or drink, after which the host owns the proceeds of the



day's labor. Before the development and spread of the capitalist monetary economy, such CWEs were virtually the only means (excluding slavery) by which a group larger than the domestic unit could be mobilized for a project requiring a larger communal effort. This is particularly true of societies without centralized political authority, but even obligatory forms of labor (*corvée*) organized by chiefs or kings operate within this idiom.

Work feasts are extremely important in the political economy because of the context they provide for the acquisition and conversion of symbolic and economic capital. In the first place, as with all other types of feast, they provide an opportunity to make public statements about prestige and acquire symbolic capital. A lavish work feast augments the reputation of the host in the same way that sponsoring a communal ritual does. However, it also provides a means of harnessing the labor of others in order to acquire economic capital that can subsequently be converted to symbolic capital by several means. In effect, work feasts act as a mechanism of indirect conversion in multi-centric economies that can provide a potential catalyst for increasing inequality in social relations (see Chapter 9).

#### SOCIOECONOMIC PARAMETERS OF EMPOWERING FEASTS

The empowering feast pattern operates on a variety of scales and in numerous contexts within a given society. It may extend from the private hosting of a pot of beer among a small group of friends, to the hosting of trade partners from another community, to the sponsorship of major community life-crisis ceremonies and religious festivals. Guests may include members of the local community or people from other communities. The extent of the symbolic capital derived from these activities varies according to the context, the lavishness of the hospitality provided, and the range of guests convened. The host may be either an individual household, a kinship unit, or an entire community. In the latter cases there are usually certain individuals who act as managers and derive prestige from their role in successfully organizing and executing feasts that represent the group to outsiders; hence prestige accrues to both the hosting group as a whole and to certain influential individuals who can mobilize group activities.

Although most households will engage in some form of this kind of feasting behavior, hosting large-scale feasts requires considerable planning, time, and labor (for both agricultural production and culinary preparation), as well as large surplus stocks of food and/or drink. The kinds of food and drink traditionally available in most African agrarian societies (and most prehistoric societies) would generally have had very limited storability, especially once prepared for consumption. This would necessitate, in most cases, a large labor force for final preparation and serving just prior to the feast as well as command of a large

ready supply of agricultural produce. The institutional arrangements for mobilizing these large supplies of labor and food vary a great deal from society to society, but in all cases the organization and execution of a large feast requires the host to be a good manager. It is usually advantageous for a household sponsoring a feast to be able to provide a large portion, if not the bulk, of the labor and raw materials from its own reserves, and a high incidence of polygyny among bigmen and other types of informal leaders is often cited in this connection (cf. Boserup 1970:37; Geschire 1982; Friedman 1984; Lemonnier 1990).

In some cases work feasts may also be employed to harness the labor of others in differentially increasing the productive base of certain households (see Chapter 9). In most cases of very large feasts, however, the host must mobilize additional food and labor contributions through personal networks of social obligation. These networks of support are established by adept building up of symbolic capital over the years through various arenas of prestige competition and various deployments of economic capital. Hence a large, lavish feast is not just an isolated event. It is a moment of public ritual drama in a continuous process of political manipulation that serves as an advertisement of the scale of the support base that a social manager has been able to construct through various transactions, at the same time that it produces further symbolic capital.

It is important to underline the significant scale of the resources that are devoted to this kind of commensal political activity in most societies, and especially to note the resources devoted to the production of alcoholic beverages for such purposes (see Dietler 1990:361–362). One frequently sees archaeological estimates of “subsistence” food production requirements that both ignore the importance of alcoholic beverages and do not take such crucial festive requirements for social reproduction and politics into account. Yet, where attempts have been made to measure such things in ethnographic contexts, the figures are consistently impressive. Haggblade (1992), for example, noted that households in Botswana consume 15–20 percent of all the grain produced in the form of sorghum beer, much of it consumed in work feasts during the harvest time when many men remain intoxicated most of the time. Similarly, Richards (1939:80) estimated that an average household among the Bemba of Zambia used about 400 pounds of millet per year in brewing beer, out of a total production of about 2,400 pounds of grain (i.e., about 17 percent); and for chiefs, who commonly drink beer every day as part of their duties of hospitality (and may virtually subsist on it), the quantity is much higher. Netting (1964) estimated that the Kofyar of Nigeria consume about 40 gallons (151 liters) of millet beer per person each year, while annual consumption estimates for the city of Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso ran to 236 liters of traditional beer per person, with half the annual grain consumption for a family being in the form of beer (Pallier 1972; Saul 1981). Likewise, Garine (1996) noted

that among the Koma of Cameroon sorghum beer provides about a third of the total calories consumed during the year. He further calculated the large investments involved in hosting different kinds of feasts. For one age-grade ceremony, one needs 70 pots of beer (490 liters made from about 100 kg of cereal), plus another 50 kg of sorghum flour for 24 porridge balls, plus a number of cattle (that are worth up to \$400 each); for a cattle dance, one needs 75 pots of beer, 20 porridge balls, and the most prestigious cattle; and for the funeral of a woman, one needs 37 pots of beer (Gariné 1996). Similarly, Rehfish (1987) noted that, among the Mambila of Nigeria, one beer feast in the competitive series he studied mobilized over 480 pots of beer (plus 47 chickens, 1 sheep, a dog, kola nuts, and tobacco) to counter a previous feast in which 430 pots of beer (and 30 chickens) had been offered. In Manga (a Mossi town of about 7,000 inhabitants in Burkina Faso), memorial ceremonies called *kuure* are the occasions for the most lavish beer feasts. In one week, five *kuure* were held in one ward, consuming 1,900 kg of red sorghum made into beer (with seven cartloads of wood—1,400 kg—required for brewing and cooking for one of these feasts alone); and, during a single dry season, within the town as a whole, 10 tons of sorghum were converted into beer for these memorial feasts alone, with a total annual festive consumption estimated at 14 tons of grain brewed for beer (Saul 1981). Finally, among the Luo of Kenya, funerals are the occasions for the most lavish feasts mounted in this society. These events frequently result in the serious impoverishment of the hosting family, and the Kenyan government has even attempted to intervene legally to limit the scale of Luo funerals.

All of this represents a substantial investment of agricultural and culinary labor in the essentially political activity of acquiring and maintaining symbolic capital and creating and sustaining social relationships. Moreover, contrary to some persisting archaeological conceptions of economically autonomous domestic units, it represents a substantial portion of domestic agricultural production that is regularly dedicated from the beginning to flowing outside the household and being consumed by people in other domestic units. Hence, it is clear that recognizing the importance of feasting for both social reproduction and political action in agrarian societies should provoke a corollary recognition of the scale of productive labor and resources necessarily devoted to these crucial features of social life. Feasts are an instrumental force in the organization of production as well as in the structuring of social relations and power.

#### PATRON-ROLE FEASTS

The second major mode of commensal politics that may be distinguished I will call the "patron-role feast." This involves the formalized use of commensal hospitality to symbolically reiterate and legitimize institutionalized relations of

asymmetrical social power. This corresponds to a specific form of what has traditionally been called "redistribution" in the literature of economic anthropology (cf. Polanyi 1957; Sahlins 1972). The operative symbolic trope behind this form of commensal politics is the same as for the previous mode: the relationship of reciprocal obligation engendered through hospitality. In this case, however, the expectation of equal reciprocation is no longer maintained. Rather, the acceptance of a continually unequal pattern of hospitality symbolically expresses the formalization of unequal relations of status and power and ideologically naturalizes it through repetition of an event that induces sentiments of social debt. On the one hand, those who are continually in the role of guests are symbolically acknowledging their acceptance of subordinate status vis-à-vis the continual host. On the other hand, the role of continual and generous host for the community at large comes to be seen as a duty incumbent upon the person who occupies a particular elevated status position or formal political role. Institutionalization of authority relies on this binding asymmetrical commensal link between unequal partners in a patron/client relationship.

This is the principle that lies behind the regular lavish hospitality expected of chiefs and kings in almost all societies where they exist, and certainly those in Africa. This sense of obligation for generosity in a commensal context is nicely encapsulated in the Baganda definition of the essential qualities of a good chief: "beer, meat and politeness" (Mair 1934:183). Among the Nyoro, also of Uganda, the king was expected to regularly hold great feasts and give gifts, and many of his special names emphasize this expected generosity. A decline in the lavishness of the feasts provided by the king was cause for complaints. Chiefs under the king were also expected to follow this pattern on a more local level (Beattie 1960). Similarly, among the Pondo of South Africa, Hunter noted that "Generosity is a primary virtue and the mark of a chief." It was particularly important for the chief to dispense generous hospitality, and "there was always much beer at the great places." Indeed, the Pondo word for "chief," *Inkosi*, is also the word in everyday usage for "thank you" (1961:387–388). Dillon provides a more detailed idea of the scale of such obligations among the Metá of Cameroon:

The foremost duty of a *fon* [village chief] in the mind of any Metá person was to feed his people. This was done most lavishly when he provided several grand feasts at the time of his installation. Yet the *fon* also entertained more modestly on a regular basis. Each time that the villagers worked for him he was obligated to feed them when they had finished their task, and he hosted the entire village whenever he held an annual celebration involving dancing. Likewise, if the village went to war, . . . the *fon* . . . had to provide the returning warriors with an appropriate reception. But even if no such activities had taken place within a year, the people sometimes still expected the *fon* to give them a feast simply because he was their leader.

Besides hosting the entire village on special occasions, the *fon* frequently entertained individuals and small groups. He was expected to have wine ready for such visitors at any time, as well as for the *mikum si* [senior village notables] when they met on the village rest day. Moreover, if there was a market in his village, he held court in a house just outside of it, providing palm wine for both the local notables and important visitors. . . .

Since the *fon* was continually receiving visitors—on week days, on village rest days, on special occasions, and on market days—he was in an excellent position to use the norms of hospitality as a political tool. He could honor and reward allies as well as cultivating the nonaligned. At the same time, he gained prestige with the entire community by feeding it well. (Dillon 1990:129–130)

Similarly, among the Bemba of Zambia, Richards noted that the chief was responsible for feeding all those who provided tribute work on his *corvée* projects, courtiers, executive officials, visiting councilors, and others. She estimated that during one nine-month period the main chief provided food and beer for at least one day for 561 men and 324 women who provided labor and, among others, about 40 tribal councilors with their wives and retinue at least twice (1939:147). As she noted, the culinary labor for this is provided by the multiple wives of the chief, under the direction of the senior wife who was necessarily a woman with “a good deal of organizing ability, capable of supervising younger wives, arranging for the endless grinding and brewing required in the capital, and the stirring of huge pots of porridge to be served in enormous eating-baskets about eight times the size of an ordinary *icipe*” (1939:148). As she further stated, “The whole of this system of distributing food is of course necessary to the chief if he is to make gardens and conduct tribal business through his councilors. But it is more than this. The giving of food, as in most African tribes, is an absolutely essential attribute of chieftainship, just as it is of authority in the village or household” (1939:148). Correspondingly, the failure of a chief to provide food for his subjects considerably weakens his prestige. “The tradition of the generous king survives as a standard against which the modern ruler is constantly measured, and measured to his disadvantage” (Richards 1939:264).

It is important to emphasize that this kind of practice is not, as has sometimes been posited in functionalist accounts, necessarily a systemically adaptive means of providing balanced food security for a population. Rather, it is first and foremost a politico-symbolic device for legitimizing status differences, and any nutritional benefits to the population at large are highly variable (see Friedman 1984; Hayden and Gargett 1990; Pryor 1977). This political function is underlined by the fact that challenges to chiefly authority can also be launched through feasting. Anigbo (1996) provides an excellent example of such a challenge among the Igbo of Nigeria in the form of a case in which two contestants for the chiefship fought

over who had the right (by virtue of lineage seniority) to convene an important “feast of yams,” which sets the date for eating new yams. This conflict culminated in a dispute over who would host the centrally important *omabe* (mask feast): each candidate ended up holding this feast on a different day, with the supporters of each boycotting the feast of his rival.

Chiefs raise food supplies for this lavish public hospitality in a variety of ways (e.g., see Hunter 1961:384–389; Richards 1939; Schapera 1938). Often tribute in food and drink furnishes an important part, with individuals obligated to provide the chief with a portion of their own production. For example, Gutmann (1926:346) noted that Chagga chiefs collected part of their tribute in the form of a portion of the banana beer brewed by households. He states that the people were happy to render this tribute because it enabled the chief to maintain a continuing open feast at his residence, which they liked to attend, but also that the chief’s henchmen were constantly checking to make sure that no household brewed without paying the beer tribute.

The work feast (especially in the more obligatory *corvée* form), directed toward the extensive fields of the chief, is another common mechanism for mobilizing food stocks for such purposes (see Chapter 9). Among the Bemba of Zambia, for example, Richards (1939) noted that chiefs organize the largest labor groups found in the country to work their own fields: she estimated, for example, that 275 men-days and 210 women-days per year were required for the gardens of one smaller chief for cutting and clearing branches, respectively (1939:388). Moreover, chiefs are very often ostentatiously polygynous in comparison to their people, providing a large pool of household labor; and they sometimes have attached forms of dependent labor (such as, in the past, slaves).

#### DIACRITICAL FEASTS

The third major mode of commensal politics, which I will call the “diacritical feast,” involves the use of differentiated cuisine and styles of consumption as a diacritical symbolic device to naturalize and reify concepts of ranked differences in the status of social orders or classes (cf. Elias 1978; Goody 1982; Bourdieu 1984). Although it serves a somewhat similar general function to the previous pattern (i.e., the naturalization and objectification of inequality in social relations), it differs from it in several important respects. In the first place, the basis of symbolic force shifts from quantity to matters of style and taste. Moreover, the emphasis shifts from an asymmetrical commensal bond between unequal partners to a statement of exclusive and unequal commensal circles: obligations of reciprocal hospitality are no longer the basis of status claims and power.

This is the distinction made by Goody (1982) when he differentiated between “hieratic” and “hierarchical” systems of stratification in his discussion of the ori-

gins and significance of cuisine. According to Goody, the development of such diacritical culinary practices is often linked to the development of specialized food preparers for the elite class (replacing wives in this role, who become commensal partners), and commensal exclusivity is often accompanied by class endogamy. The feasting patterns of the Hawaiian kingdoms described by Kirch (Chapter 6) are a classic example of this, and of what I mean by the diacritical feast mode. Although Goody's dichotomy may be an overly broad generalization, it is clear that the practice of diacritical feasting transforms elite feasts into what Appadurai (1986:21) has called "tournaments of value," which serve both to define elite status membership and to channel social competition within clearly defined boundaries. Diacritical stylistic distinctions may be based upon the use of rare, expensive, or exotic foods or food ingredients. Or they may be orchestrated through the use of elaborate food-service vessels and implements or architectonically distinguished settings that serve to "frame" elite consumption as a distinctive practice even when the food itself is not distinctive. Or they may be based upon differences in the complexity of the pattern of preparation and consumption of food and the specialized knowledge and taste (i.e., "cultural capital": Bourdieu 1984) that proper consumption entails.

Because this type of feasting relies upon style and taste for its symbolic force, it is subject to emulation by those aspiring to higher status. Such emulation constitutes an attempted elevation of status through representational means, which may focus on either (or both) the mimetic development of styles of action (manners, tastes, etc.) or the use and consumption of objects (foods, service vessels, etc) that are materialized signs of a particular social identity. This can result in the gradual spread through a society of foods and food practices by what Appadurai (1986) has described as a "turnstile effect." This happened in ancient Greece with the expansion of the *symposion* (wine-drinking party) from its aristocratic origins throughout urban society (Dentzer 1982; Murray 1990), and it was a common feature in the development of European bourgeois manners and food culture (Bourdieu 1984; Elias 1978). Junker (Chapter 10) offers another example among Philippine chiefdoms.

Such emulation, and the resulting devaluation of diacritical significance, can be thwarted only by the imposition of sumptuary laws that restrict consumption within clear social boundaries or by the use of exotic foods and consumption paraphernalia, access to which can be controlled through elevated expense or limited networks of acquisition. In the absence of effective means of monopolization, the weakening of diacritical symbolic force caused by emulation may provoke continual shifts in elite tastes as they react to the process of imitation. These shifts need not be solely in the direction of increasing elaboration. In many cases, this reaction may be toward ostentatiously simpler, rather than more elab-

orate, cuisine and/or consumption paraphernalia, depending upon the nature of the emulation being reacted against. The fluctuating trajectories of such changes depend upon both the nature of historical precedents and opportunities for strategic shifts presented by invention and the incorporation of exotic elements.

Africa is an interesting case in the analysis of the diacritical feast pattern precisely because, according to Goody (1982), one should not find it there. The Pondo of South Africa provide a good example of the kind of situation that Goody took to be typical of African societies: "In spite of the fact that chiefs were the wealthiest men in the country, chiefs always lived very much as their people, and most still do. At the great place there is more beer and meat than elsewhere, but otherwise there is no difference between the diet of a chief and that of commoners" (Hunter 1961:388).

However, although it is true that African societies do not appear to have developed highly elaborated diacritical cuisines to the same extent as the states of Europe and Asia, they are not without diacritical food practices that serve to symbolically demarcate kings, chiefs, and nobles. Often African royal or noble culinary diacritica are expressed in the form of special food avoidances or privileged consumption of certain animals of ritual significance rather than through consumption of specially elaborated cuisine. For example, among the Nyoro of Uganda, the king was not allowed to eat certain kinds of common foods thought to be of low status (e.g., sweet potatoes, cassava, and certain vegetables), and the men he appointed as "crown wearers" (i.e., great chiefs of high status and political authority) had to observe the same restrictions. Moreover, the king's cooks were not allowed to have sexual intercourse just before or during their alternating periods of service in the palace (Beattie 1960). Among the Metá of Cameroon, the *fon* [village chief] has exclusive rights to receive, butcher, and dispose of certain prestigious and dangerous animals known as "noble game" (e.g., leopards and pythons) from which he was believed to acquire power. He would also share specifically prescribed parts of these animals with the senior village notables (Dillon 1990:133-135, 153-157). Among the Mamprusi of Ghana, the king observes all the common food prohibitions of his subjects, but in addition he does not eat goat, black fish, or the flesh of a variety of other animals associated with earth-shrines. Moreover, his diet is restricted to highly esteemed items (e.g., guinea fowl and millet porridge) prepared separately for him by a junior wife under the supervision of the senior wife (Brown 1975:158-159). Among the Bemba of Zambia, even when traveling, a chief cannot eat cooked food offered by his subjects because "porridge cooked on 'impure' fire would endanger his life" (Richards 1939:138). Rather, raw food materials are offered by subjects and these are cooked by one of the chief's wives on a fire that she creates herself. Moreover, "chiefs visiting each other will exchange uncooked food to be prepared by their

respective staffs, but only a chief's head wife could send a royal visitor dishes of porridge and relish" (Richards 1939:138). Finally, among the Igala of Nigeria the king is considered to be divine and is believed to not eat at all. In fact, the king always eats in seclusion and his food and meals are referred to only in euphemisms (Boston 1968:204–205).

Hence, diacritical culinary practices differentiating certain elevated kinds or categories of people clearly do exist even in Africa. However, they are by no means universal among African kingdoms and chiefdoms. Moreover, these rituals are sometimes so exclusively focused as to be effectively noncommensal to the extent that they perhaps defy the definition of a feast, and they tend to mark certain institutionalized political roles rather than social classes. Nevertheless, such practices do perform the ritual work noted above of reifying asymmetrical relations of power through the symbolic manipulation of food consumption in a pattern that emphasizes difference and separation of at least a small elite segment of the society.

### FEASTS AND SOCIAL BOUNDARIES

To be analytically useful, the concept of diacritical feasts requires some further cautious clarification. This is because nearly all feasts actually serve in some ways to define social boundaries while simultaneously creating a sense of community. That is, nearly all feasts serve to mark, reify, and inculcate diacritical distinctions between social groups, categories, and statuses while at the same time establishing relationships across the boundaries that they define. Gender categories and age distinctions, for example, are very commonly signaled in what I have distinguished as "empowering" feasting practices even among peoples with a strongly egalitarian political ethos. For example, among the Luo of Kenya (who do not have "diacritical feasts" in the sense defined above), categorical distinctions between men and women, between elders and younger men, and between kinship groups are signaled at feasts by spatial criteria (i.e., who sits where and with whom), temporal distinctions (i.e., the order of serving), by different types of drinking vessels and practices, and by different types of beer and food (see the later discussion of the Luo case). Similar kinds of practices, in culturally specific manifestations, are ubiquitous in the African ethnographic record (e.g., see Carlson 1990; Hunter 1961; Karp 1980; Peristiany 1939; Richards 1939; Sangree 1962). Such practices can also be a subtle but powerful means of marking the social ranking of individuals in hierarchies of prestige and influence. As Dillon noted for the Metá of Cameroon, for example, they "were very sensitive to subtle discriminations reflected in hospitality, and one man's attitude toward another might be significantly altered, depending on whether he had made a special effort to serve him or offered only lame excuses. People attending important gatherings

also noted how various guests were treated, depending on their statuses and relations with the host" (1990:130).

Similarly, social groups or networks of various kinds (affines, age grades, etc.) are frequently marked by the same kinds of practices that are used to make other insider versus stranger distinctions. Concepts of ethnicity, for example, very frequently involve beliefs (of variable accuracy) about distinctive food tastes and culinary practices. The Luo love fish and know that this distinguishes them from their Kisii neighbors to the east who eschew fish. They also believe that their own revulsion at the idea of eating caterpillars sets them apart from other neighbors to the north. Feasts can be a theater for the symbolic manipulation of such culinary distinctions in the expression of sentiments of inclusion and exclusion at various levels.

Alas, the situation is yet more complicated for archaeologists looking for evidence of what are here defined as diacritical feasts because similar symbolic devices can be used to mark categories of events as well as categories of people. Particular care must be taken not to mistake the kinds of practices that may be used to differentiate feasts in general (as ritual events) from everyday informal consumption in societies without diacritical feasts for those used to differentiate social classes in societies having diacritical feasts. In many cases, this former distinction (i.e., marking feasts as ritual events) is accomplished simply by differences in the sheer quantity of food and drink proffered and consumed, or by a change in the location and timing of consumption. However, the same types of devices used as symbolic diacritica in marking social distinctions may be employed to distinguish ritual from quotidian practice by serving as "framing devices" that act as cues establishing the ritual significance of events (see Miller 1985:181–183). For example, feasts may be marked by special foods (e.g., ones that are expensive, rare, exotic, especially rich, particularly sweet, intoxicating, etc.). Among the Luo, for example, beer is not something consumed with everyday meals and beef is a food that is normally reserved exclusively for larger feasts (although accompanied by the standard range of other daily foods). Alternatively, special service vessels or other paraphernalia (including special forms of clothing or other bodily adornment), or special architectural staging, may be employed for this marking purpose. To use the Luo as an example again, they have a distinctive paired set of very large beer pots (called *thago* and *dakong'o*) that are used only at important feasts (Herbich and Dietler 1989, 1992). Hence, among the Luo, beer, beef, and certain kinds of ceramic vessels are all indexical markers of feasts as ritual events. Finally, atypical complexity in recipes or in the structured order of service and consumption may also be used to invoke such distinctions (see Douglas 1984).

Unfortunately, there is no handy, universal rule of thumb that will enable the

archaeologist to distinguish readily between "diacritical feasts" and these other boundary-marking practices (i.e., those marking both boundaries between social groups and categories and boundaries between ritual and quotidian contexts). But I believe this disentangling of symbolic logic is both possible and useful in many instances. Each case will require a careful and critical evaluation of the contextual and associational patterns of the evidence and a multistranded, thickly textured interpretive argument in order to differentiate between "diacritical feasts" marking social classes and the diacritical use of cuisine to mark other social categories or to mark feasts as special ritual events. To take a highly simplified hypothetical example: special types of ceramic tableware that are found only in funerary contexts, but in *all* funerary contexts, are more likely representative of the latter (that is, marking the ritual nature of an event); whereas those found exclusively in male graves, but in *all* male graves probably imply both a ritual and categorical distinction; and large bronze drinking vessels found only in a limited number of very wealthy burials most likely indicate the operation of "diacritical feasts." But the plausibility of such an interpretation will depend upon other evidence from settlement data as well (see Dietler 1996 for archaeological examples).

It is important to point out that a general increase in, for example, the complexity or elaborateness of the decoration of tablewares in comparison to cooking wares (or of ceramics in general in comparison to a previous habitation level or archaeological period) is not necessarily an indication of the use of style in the development of diacritical feasts. This may simply be related to an increasing "complexification" of food-consumption patterns (in the sense of Douglas 1984) through more marked symbolic emphasis on distinctions such as that between ritual and quotidian dining practice. The diacritical feast pattern rests on an exclusive sumptuary use of style in food-consumption rituals by certain social classes whatever the relative complexity of food patterns within the society as a whole. More will be said about these issues later, but for the moment it is useful to open a brief parenthetical consideration of one of the most common categorical distinctions defined through feasting.

### FEASTS AND GENDER

As noted earlier, gender is one cultural category of social identity that is nearly everywhere marked, reified, and naturalized to some extent through feasting practices. In fact, gender is one of the most common categorical distinctions made through food/drink-related practices in general, albeit in a wide variety of culturally specific ways (Bacon 1976; Child, Barry, and Bacon 1965; Counihan and Kaplan 1998; Dietler 1990; Gefou-Madianou 1992; Herbich 1991; McDonald 1994). As the Luo example discussed below illustrates (cf. Karp 1980; Ngokwey 1987 for other African examples), such categorical boundary marking at feasts may be

based upon various permutations of symbolic diacritica, including: (1) *spatial distinctions* (that is, segregation or other structured differential positioning of men and women while eating), (2) *temporal distinctions* (such as order of serving or consumption), (3) *qualitative distinctions* (for example, in the kinds of food, drink, or service vessels men and women are given or are allowed to consume), (4) *quantitative distinctions* (in the relative amounts of food or drink served to men and women), or (5) *behavioral distinctions* (that is, differences in expected bodily comportment between women and men during and after feasting, including such things as permissible signs of intoxication, talking while eating, reaching for food, serving or being served, withdrawing from the meal first, and so on).

An important feature to signal here is that, where diacritical feasting (in the sense defined above) is in operation, these patterns of gender differentiation may vary greatly between social classes. In other words, gender may be marked in quite different ways within the feasting practices of each class. For example, Goody (1982) noted a frequent pattern in which, with the development of endogenous social classes marked by restricted commensal circles and diacritical culinary practices, one often notes a shift in the position of women of the elite class from food servers and prepares to commensal partners (with a corresponding development of specialist food preparers and servers, who are sometimes male). This does not imply any corresponding change in gendered practices in feasting among the non-elite classes; and one can anticipate in such cases a marked difference between the classes in, for example, the spatial and behavioral distinctions by which gender is marked.

It is also important to reiterate that feasting practices, although marking boundaries of gender identities in the ways noted above, simultaneously express relationships of mutual dependence across those boundaries that, in turn, represent and naturalize ideologies structuring larger societal relations of production and authority. This leads to a more general point I wish to emphasize: that understanding the gender relations that underlie, and are reproduced through, feasts is a crucial part of the project of theoretical analysis that is necessary to make feasting a productive focus of archaeological inquiry. That is because, in addition to the various aspects of symbolic representation noted above, feasting frequently is sustained by a gendered asymmetry in terms of labor and benefits. Specifically, female labor (producing and processing the agricultural supplies that are essential for feasts) often largely supports a system of feasting in which men are the primary beneficiaries in the political arena. This is one of the main reasons why there is such a strong linkage between polygyny and male political power in Africa and elsewhere (cf. Boserup 1970:37; Clark 1980; Friedman 1984; Geschire 1982; Lemonnier 1990; Vincent 1971; also see Dietler and Herbich, Chapter 9).

Female labor is often of major, or even primary, importance in agricultural



production, although the relative gendered contribution in this domain is by no means uniform (Boserup 1970; Guyer 1988). However, even more common is a dominant female contribution to the crucial culinary and serving labor that transforms raw food ingredients into feasts (Friedl 1975; Goody 1982). Moreover, although cases such as the Luo (described below), in which women provide the agricultural, culinary, and serving labor for male political activities are quite common (e.g., see Bohannan and Bohannan 1968; Clark 1980), examples of the inverse pattern (where men consistently provide the agricultural, culinary, and serving labor that underwrites feasts formally hosted by women) are extremely rare, if they exist at all.

At first glance, it may be tempting to interpret this fact as a systematic form of labor exploitation, in line with Marx's observation that women probably constituted the first exploited class (Meillassoux 1975:78). However, the question of exploitation frequently hinges upon a subtle contextual consideration of the question posed by Clark for the Kikuyu: are women "controllers of resources or themselves resources controlled by men?" (Clark 1980:367). Although exploitation is frequently a justifiable analytical conclusion, this is by no means a pattern that is universal or even generalizable in a simple way. For example, in some societies there is typically a more balanced, or even male-dominated, pattern of labor in the production of feasts (although this generally does not extend to the preparation of daily meals). Moreover, women may share in the status and political benefits from their labor by being members of an influential household or lineage (in matrilineal contexts). Their labor (and male dependence upon it) may also be overtly recognized and valued, and women may even derive considerable categorical and individual status from their central role in the furnishing of hospitality or in maintaining commensal relations with the gods (e.g., see Gero 1992; March 1998). And, in many societies, women do host their own work feasts and other feast events, although usually on a smaller scale than men. For example, among the Tiv of Nigeria, women host smaller work feasts than men, but these "underscore the prestige of important women. If a woman calls a big hoeing party and supplies generous amounts of food and beer, she will be called 'important woman' (*shagba kwase*) for months afterwards" (Bohannan and Bohannan 1968:73). Finally, the common traditional female monopolization of cooking and brewing responsibilities has, with the penetration of the monetized market economy, frequently presented women with opportunities for gaining a source of income (e.g., through beer sales), and this has sometimes enabled them to acquire considerable economic independence and intrafamilial power under changing socioeconomic conditions (e.g., see Colson and Scudder 1988; Netting 1964).

The relationship between feasts and gender is clearly a complex but analytically rich and important one. Feasts are intimately implicated in the representa-

tion, reproduction, and transformation of gender identity, as well as in the gendered structuring of relations of production and power in society. This means both that feasting is an important and potentially productive avenue for understanding gender relations and roles in archaeological contexts, and that gender must be an essential consideration in any analysis of feasting.

### RELATING THE MODES OF COMMENSAL POLITICS

Let us now return to the consideration of the different modes of commensal politics outlined earlier, because it is also necessary to say a few words about the relationships of these modes to each other. The first thing to emphasize is that they should decidedly not be interpreted as evolutionary stages that can be correlated with, for example, outmoded evolutionary typologies of political organization (band, tribe, chiefdom, state, etc.). There is, to be sure, an obvious correlation to some extent with increasing social stratification and complexity of structures of political power (for example, diacritical feasts, as defined here, are generally a feature encountered exclusively among state societies—but not all states will have diacritical feasts). However, rather than describing a series of successive evolutionary stages, these feasting modes should be viewed as constituting a progressively expansive repertoire of forms of political action through feasting. One form does not replace another; some forms simply expand the range of commensal politics in operation. It is true that there have been, and are, societies in which only empowering feasts are operative: this is the most basic and fundamentally ubiquitous mode of commensal politics. However, societies in which diacritical feasts are found are also certain to have each of the two other forms as well. In other words, where cuisine is used as a diacritical symbolic device separating classes, the politics of commensality will still be used by individuals or groups jockeying for relative status within those classes. Furthermore, kings, chiefs, and others in patron positions will often simultaneously employ unequal commensal hospitality in the patron-role pattern to legitimize institutionalized political authority roles. Likewise, both empowering and patron-role feasts are likely to be operative where the latter type is found: the use of redistributive hospitality by institutionalized patrons (e.g., "chiefs") to maintain the authority vested in their roles does not preclude the use of hospitality by others to define their relative statuses below that of such patrons, or its use by chiefs of different areas to negotiate and define their relative statuses vis-à-vis each other, or indeed its use to contest chiefly authority. Whatever kings, chiefs, or elite classes are doing with their food, common households will continue to hold feasts in their own way to establish community and personal relationships, mobilize labor, and build symbolic capital. Hence, the "festive landscape" in any given society will most likely be a palimpsest of several different modes of commensal politics operating in different contexts.

A second point to bear in mind is that the distinctions between the three modes of commensal politics are not precisely of the same order—and this fact has important implications for the role of feasts in social change. The difference between empowering feasts and patron-role feasts is really one of establishing a transitional division along a continuum of expectations. The symbolic logic of both is quite similar: both operate by defining a single “consumption-community” within which asymmetries are expressed and naturalized to different degrees by the sharing of food. It is really the extent of institutionalized acceptance, or expectation, of a continuing pattern of unreciprocated or unbalanced hospitality that defines the difference. As the example in the following section will show, there is often a subtle distinction between the two, and it is not difficult to imagine how the patron-role feast may crystallize out of certain forms of empowering feasts. It is also important to recognize that tensions and conflict may actually be created when groups approach such feasts with different understandings of their political logic: for example, when the hosts view the feast in the patron-role mode and the guests view it in the empowering mode. This is particularly a risk with feasting across cultural boundaries, where, for example, hosts and guests are members of different ethnic groups that do not share the same cultural codes and behavioral expectations. But it can also be manipulated consciously by individuals or groups who are quite aware of the conventions but who, for example, choose to challenge chiefly authority by refusing to acknowledge a patron-role feast as such and treating it instead in the competitive empowering mode. This form of “festive revolution” is, of course, one of the many ways in which feasting can become a site of contestation and a dynamic agent in political change.

In contrast to the other two modes, the diacritical feast manifests a symbolic logic that differs in kind. It serves to reify asymmetries along lines of class or social order by defining the boundaries of separate “consumption-communities.” It also, of course, serves to solidify identity within those consumption-communities through food sharing and the cultivation of shared tastes. Again, it is important to emphasize that all feasting rituals involve boundary-defining practices. Social categories such as age and gender, for example, are very commonly marked in the ways noted in previous sections; and it is important for archaeologists to be aware of the operation of such diacritical devices. But these other distinctions are established *within* commensal networks through variations in food-sharing practices. What are here called “diacritical feasts” represent a special kind of boundary-defining practice based upon commensal exclusion that I believe is sufficiently different and heuristically valuable to merit distinguishing categorically. As prior studies of prehistoric European contexts have shown (see Dietler 1996, 1999a), it can be a productive category for archaeological analysis.

## LUO FEASTS

In order to further clarify some of the more abstract points made earlier, I will briefly treat several aspects of feasting among the Luo of western Kenya in somewhat more detail than the other examples raised in the discussion. The Luo are a Nilotic-speaking people who inhabit a region of about 10,000 km<sup>2</sup> surrounding the Winam Gulf, in the northeast corner of Lake Victoria. They have a patrilineal kinship system and live in homesteads scattered across the countryside, which are occupied by polygynous extended families with a patrilocal postmarital residence pattern (see Dietler and Herbich 1989, 1993; Evans Pritchard 1949; Herbich 1987; Herbich and Dietler 1992, 1993; Shipton 1989; Southall 1952).

Agriculture provides the base of their diet, and this is carried out by women in scattered sets of small plots in the vicinity of the homestead. Grain crops include several varieties of sorghum, millet, and maize. Root crops, especially sweet potatoes and cassava, are also important, as are various kinds of beans, greens, lentils, and wild leaves. In some areas, bananas are also grown. Protein sources include milk, fish (caught in the Gulf and traded widely throughout the region), chickens, sheep, and goats. Beef is also highly prized, but cattle are an important symbol of wealth and are usually slaughtered only for feasts. Aside from purchased fish and sporadic “target” buying and selling of grain at the local markets, most households grow most of the food they eat. There is little reliance on foodstuffs imported from outside the region (aside from salt and a few luxuries, such as tea, sugar, and tobacco).

With these basic ingredients, the Luo manage to maintain a relatively varied repertoire of dishes, and there are regional and family preferences for recipes. The main meals are constituted around a thick, bread-like porridge (called *kuon*) made from boiled sorghum or maize flour. This is the symbolically central ingredient of the diet, and a Luo who has not eaten *kuon* will say that (s)he has not eaten. Various stew-like dishes made from vegetables, fish, or meat serve essentially as a condiment to *kuon*. Snacks and lesser meals consist of a maize and bean mixture (*nyoyo*), a thin millet or maize porridge (*nyuka*), sweet potatoes and sour milk, and other such dishes. The main alcoholic beverage is beer (*kong'o*) made from millet and/or maize, although a distilled alcohol known as *chang'aa* has also become popular in recent decades. These alcoholic beverages are not items consumed with daily meals; rather, they are essential components of feasts.

As with many African societies, there is usually a seasonal period of hunger just before the main harvest of the year, when grain supplies tend to run low and must be stretched. Luo history is also marked by periodic episodes of major famine caused by crop failures and cattle epidemics. These episodes are known by name and they were important enough to constitute many of the main hinges

of collective memory (see Dietler and Herbich 1993), or what Shipton (1990:375) has aptly called "the hitching-posts of history."

Feasts are an important element of Luo life, and they play most of the various roles attributed to the "empowering" mode in the earlier discussion. The largest feasts, and indeed the largest gatherings in the society outside of markets, take place at funerals. These events are held at the homestead of the deceased and are marked by the provision of large quantities of beer and beef, along with the standard *kuon* and other foods. They are accompanied by ritual dramaturgical practices such as parading of cattle, dancing, singing, speeches, and the recitation of praise songs that recount the accomplishments of both the deceased and the speakers. They often last for several days, during which a large group of lineage members, affines, and neighbors must be kept satisfied with copious amounts of food and drink. The prestige of the deceased and his/her family are thought to be reflected in the size of the gathering capable of being assembled and sustained at the funeral feast and the lavishness of the hospitality provided. Influential men have the most ostentatiously lavish funerals, but every Luo is concerned about having an impressive funeral mounted for him/her. This concern is often voiced by older widows as a major reason for joining religious groups, as these assure their followers of a proper funeral. As noted earlier, the scale of hospitality at funerals is often so great that at least temporary impoverishment of the family may result, and the lavishness of such feasts among the Luo and other west Kenyan peoples is the subject of frequent harangues by government ministers and members of other ethnic groups (e.g., Mburu 1978).

Less spectacular feasts are also held for marriages, harvest celebrations, collective labor mobilization, the founding of a new homestead, and a host of other things (such as ceremonies concerning the birth of twins). Small-scale gatherings of elders or meetings between friends are also often marked by sharing a pot of beer. In general, feasts are distinguished from daily meals by several features. Most commonly, these include the consumption of beer (and/or *chang'aa*) and beef, which are not everyday foods. They are also sometimes marked by the location of consumption and the use of special containers.

In the territory of Alego, for example, homesteads have a special shaded area known as *siwanda* that serves as the place where senior men at feasts gather together to drink beer and eat.<sup>6</sup> At feasts of some importance, these elders will consume unfiltered beer out of a special large pot called a *thago* (Fig. 3.1). A *thago* may be larger than a meter in diameter and a meter tall, and it is supported by being partly buried in the ground at the *siwanda*. The men sit around the pot in a circle drinking from long straws (*oseke*) made of hollow vine stems with a woven filter on the end (Fig. 3.2). The possession of a personal straw, which one carries to



Figure 3.1. Photograph of Luo communal beer drinking pot (*thago*), on left, and beer fermentation pot (*dakong'o*), on right. Scale in cm. (Photo by M. Dietler and I. Herbich)

beer drinks in a special bamboo case, is a clear sign of senior male status. Another large pot, called a *dakong'o* (Fig. 3.1), in which the beer has been brewed, always stands near the *thago*, and beer is removed from it and mixed with hot water for consumption from the *thago*. Younger men will generally drink and eat in the clear area in front of the house (known as *laru*). They will also usually drink filtered beer that is served in a pot called *mbiru*, which is much smaller than a *thago*. They will consume their beer by dipping large cups made from half of a hollowed gourd (*agwata*; sometimes now tin cans or enamel mugs) into the *mbiru*. Women may also consume some beer in this fashion (Herbich 1991). Every household will have at least one *mbiru*, but the same is not true of *thago*. These latter are large, expensive pots that may be owned by only a few of the wealthier homesteads in neighborhood. Other homesteads will have to borrow a *thago* when they wish to organize an important feast. These are highly prized pots that usually are known within a neighborhood by a specific name, and many examples we found in homes were over 50 years old, some much older. Figure 3.3 offers a splendid iconic representation of such a feast, and the marking of social categories by these practices. It is a mural from an abandoned beer hall in a Luo market center (such beer halls were outlawed by the Kenyan government during the 1970s as part of a longstanding, and unsuccessful, struggle by the colonial and



Figure 3.2. Photograph showing how beer is consumed from *thago* through a long vine-stem straw (*oseke*). (Photo by M. Dietler and I. Herbich)

postcolonial Kenyan governments to exert state control over alcohol: see Ambler 1991).

The consumption of food is also done on a communal basis. A "loaf" of *kuon* will be served on a basket plate and shared by several diners who will break off morsels and dip them into a common ceramic bowl (*tawo*) of the stew/sauce (sometimes these serving containers are now replaced by imported enamel dishes). These serving containers are generally not different from those used in everyday meals.

Figure 3.4 is a photograph that rather ironically encapsulates the gendered relations of production that underlie Luo feasting. It portrays a woman working at



Figure 3.3. Photograph of a mural on the exterior of an abandoned beer hall showing an iconic representation of a Luo feast. Note the elder men drinking from a large communal pot (*thago*) through long straws (*oseke*) while younger men and women drink from cups, and a woman acts in a serving capacity. (Photo by M. Dietler and I. Herbich)

drying *sinoho* (a processed grain flour product resulting from an initial stage in the *chaîne opératoire* of the beer fermentation process: see Herbich 1991) on the floor of another abandoned beer hall with a feasting mural in the background. This is one of the many laborious steps necessary to produce, store, and process a sufficient quantity of grain to mount a feast. Women are the agricultural and culinary labor force that lies behind the production of all Luo feasts, although they share in the ensuing prestige and other benefits only indirectly, as wives of the generous host. Women grow the crops, process them, and do the cooking, brewing, and serving. This is one of the reasons that, in this polygynous society, having many wives is not only a sign of wealth, but is essential for being able to mount large feasts. Acquiring wives requires wealth and is a gradual process because one must give a large amount of bridewealth to the woman's family in the form of cattle and, now, often money (formerly, iron hoes were also given). However, multiple wives considerably expand the possibilities for a homestead to offer lavish hospitality, which, as further discussion will show, has important political implications (see also Dietler and Herbich, Chapter 9).

The Luo do not have anything resembling the agonistic competitive feasting of New Guinea big-men or the escalating Mambila (Nigeria) bear feasts (Reh-



Figure 3.4. Photograph of a Luo woman engaged in drying *sinoho* (one step in the laborious *chaîne opératoire* of beer production) on the floor of an abandoned beer hall with a mural showing an idealized representation of a Luo feast in the background. (Photo by M. Dietler and I. Herbich)

fisch 1987). Yet generosity in commensal hospitality is an essential practice in maintaining a man's prestige and influence, and the funeral feast is a final dramatic affirmation of status. Luo feasts also provide a prime context for demonstrations of oratory, which is a highly valued skill that also brings prestige. This oratory includes forms of ritualized boasting in which men extol their own achievements and denigrate those of their rivals. Specialized praise singers, who accompany their songs on a form of lyre (*nyatiti*), may also be employed for this purpose.

Obviously, the Luo do not have diacritical feasts in the sense defined earlier (at least those in the countryside—the situation of the Luo who have moved to the capital city of Nairobi is somewhat different). The question of patron-role feasts

is a little more complicated, and the issue is worth discussing in some detail because the Luo case highlights the fluid boundary between empowering and patron-role feasts noted earlier. Although they now live with a system of “chiefs” constructed by the British colonial government and continued by the postcolonial Kenyan state, the Luo have traditionally had a strongly egalitarian political ethos and lacked centralized authority. They do, however, have an indigenous term, *ruoth*, that is used to refer to modern chiefs. In the precolonial era this term more likely meant something closer to “leader” or “man of influence” than to the institutionalized political role it has come to signify. However, oral histories indicate that the degree to which individuals in the past were able to transform their informal influence into naturalized positions of authority and power varied somewhat from region to region.

Whisson (1961) offers an interesting case study of this process in the territory of Asembo that both illustrates the means available of concentrating power in the precolonial era (including feasting) and the ramifications this had during the imposition of the colonial administration and its structure of institutionalized chiefs.<sup>7</sup> Traditional Luo political organization has been described as a classic case of the segmentary lineage system (Evans-Pritchard 1949; Southall 1952). The modern administrative boundaries within Luo territory, which were defined during the colonial era, effectively froze into static form what had previously been a series of highly dynamic factional and territorial struggles between competing subgroups organized according to lineage affiliation and military expediency. Based on oral histories, Whisson describes competition for leadership in the context of such factional struggles during the immediately precolonial and early colonial eras in Asembo, the territory of the Luo subgroup known as JoAsembo along the north coast of the Winam Gulf.

One of the main functions of precolonial leaders was the arbitration of disputes within the smallest local territorial unit, the *gweng'*. Becoming an influential leader required the building of prestige and moral authority, and these qualities were acquired from several possible sources. The most immediate criteria were genealogical position and the strength of the lineage: the most genealogically senior member of the dominant lineage of the *gweng'* had responsibilities to settle disputes within the *gweng'*, and he met with other similar leaders to attempt to resolve disputes between *gwenge*.<sup>8</sup> Disputes that could not be settled peacefully were resolved by fission and migration, or by armed conflict. The segmentary lineage ideology structuring patterns of alliance and opposition in conflict created opportunities for leadership by members of strong lineage segments at all the points of segmentation. However, this was also augmented by the creation of pragmatic alliances in which strong lineages would se-

cure the support of weaker "jodak" (tenant) lineage groups that had settled in their territory after being forced out or fissioning elsewhere.

Hence, as Whisson (1961:7) pointed out, the main sources of power that an individual could manipulate came from: (1) being a senior member of a powerful lineage, (2) personal ability in warfare, and (3) the capacity to marshal a significant amount of support in the face of conflict. Skill in the use of magical power (*bilo*) was particularly important in winning prestige in the sphere of warfare. *Jobilo* (magicians) were feared and respected for their powers of divination and their ability to use killing magic on enemies. The ability to rally support depended upon the accumulation of wealth and prestige, and it is in this domain that feasting played an important role. Wealth in this context would be reckoned in terms of cattle and wives, both of which were essential for the production of feasts. Acquiring large numbers of cattle was greatly aided by skill in raiding (which was itself a source of prestige). These cattle were used for prized meat at feasts, but also for the payment of bridewealth that was necessary to acquire wives. A large number of wives greatly increased the capacity of the homestead for agricultural and culinary labor, so that wealthy men were able create and use food surpluses to host feasts for the lineage leaders who assembled to discuss political and judicial matters. As Whisson noted, this wealth (in cattle, wives, and crops) was used to entertain "the leaders of the clans and subclans forming the nucleus of a council or court and meeting in the home of the richest or most respected man. This man became *ruoth*, the leader" (1961:7).

The strongest leaders would be able to draw upon all three of the mutually enhancing sources of power noted above. But a skilled *jabilo* from a weaker lineage who had accumulated the cattle and wives to host lavish feasts could even overcome a genealogical handicap by rallying the support of other lineages and creating political alliances. The British colonial government attempted to squeeze this fairly loose and fluid set of political relations into their preconceived model of "chiefdoms" operating as a hierarchical administrative system. They imposed a model of institutionalized central authority with formalized political roles and rules of succession upon a much more dynamic and competitive set of political practices sustained by cultural perceptions of authority that were far more contingent.

The process by which the British "identified" Luo chiefs and the manipulations that went on among competing Luo men of influence seeking to be named chiefs is a complex tale. What is important to retain for the purposes of this discussion of feasts is that the colonial situation under which these new chiefs operated created contradictions that sometimes undermined their authority. These new chiefs were agents of the state, but their ability to perform the functions that the state demanded of them depended upon maintaining the traditional forms of

symbolic capital. However, the suppression of warfare and raiding eliminated both a major former arena for the acquisition of prestige and an important source of the cattle that produced the wives and feasts necessary to operate successfully in the other major arena of political action. Government pay was not sufficient to compensate for this loss and the state took a dim view of augmenting income through bribery. As in the case of an early Asembo chief named Odindo, those who were unable to keep up the lavish hospitality that people expected of a traditional *ruoth* sometimes fell from power in the face of continual scheming by rivals from other lineages (Whisson 1961:11). Others were able to survive by better adapting to their role as agents of the state by having their sons sent to mission schools and gaining the skills of literacy that the government particularly prized. It is noticeable, however, that successful chiefs today are still conspicuously more polygynous than the rest of their people. For example, one chief in our research area had 45 wives when we arrived and over 50 when we left three years later.

## CONCLUSION

The Luo examples should serve to give a better sense of the experience of commensal politics that lies behind the more abstract theoretical discussion offered earlier. In particular, one can begin to understand the way in which the hospitality used in empowering feasts to acquire and maintain symbolic capital can become transformed into the institutionalized expectation of the patron-role feast; and one can see how a failure to meet those expectations can seriously weaken credibility and undercut authority. One can also get a better sense of the way that feasting either combines or competes with other sources of symbolic capital (prowess in warfare, oratorical skill, powers in magic, genealogical pedigree, gift giving, etc.) to establish prestige and influence. Feasting is by no means the only arena of political action, but it is very frequently an extremely important, if not crucial, one. The Luo case also illustrates the subtle ways in which social categories and boundaries are symbolically marked by the ritual practices of feasts, and why those operative among the empowering feasts of the Luo are quite different in their symbolic logic from those described for the diacritical feast. Finally, this case also highlights the often unremarked gendered relations of production that support commensal politics. The division of labor and symbolic capital along gender lines is certainly not always identical to, nor so starkly realized as, that among the Luo; but this is always an important consideration in the theorization of feasting.

For archaeologists, the implications of the discussion presented in this chapter are several and important. In the first place, it is clear that feasts commonly serve a variety of crucial structural roles in articulating the political economy of a wide



array of societies. It is also clear that feasts are a prime arena and instrument of political action by individuals and social groups pursuing economic and political goals and competing for influence within their social worlds. However, the ways in which feasts serve the acquisition and transformation of symbolic and economic capital are extremely complex, and archaeologists need a well-developed theoretical understanding of the nature of feasting ritual if we are to understand political life in ancient societies in something more than mechanistic typological terms. In my view, it is critical that we begin to tackle issues of situated agency and the role of practice in transforming structure if we wish to say anything of insightful significance about the historical development of different forms of social inequality. In this paper I have tried to present several theoretical constructs based upon comparative analysis of ethnographic data that I believe hold some promise in analyzing feasting ritual, and I have elsewhere tried to demonstrate how they may be applied to archaeological cases in ways that yield fruitful new insights (e.g., Dietler 1990, 1996, 1999a, 1999b). However, this is by no means a definitive formulation, and I look forward to the emerging dialogue on these issues that is promised by the convergence of perspectives in this volume.

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## NOTES

1. To avoid possible confusion, let me emphasize that I use the word *commensal* in its original sense, rather than its peculiar biological adaptation. The word derives from the Latin *com mensalis*, indicating the sharing of a table—hence, eating together. Needless to say, many people around the world manage to eat together quite well without using a table. Moreover, in a number of cases the sharing of food is

- accomplished without the host and guests actually eating in the same space—in some contexts it is actually considered impolite for the host to be present when his/her guests consume their food (e.g., see Richards 1939:135–136). However, despite the minor drawback of being grounded in a Eurocentric cultural trope, the term *commensal* does provide a convenient way of indicating a range of forms of communal food consumption. Other possible alternative terms in common usage, such as adjectival versions of *companion* (indicating the sharing of bread; from Latin) and *symposium* (the sharing of drink; from Greek), have even more problematic semantic histories and associational problems. And the game of inventing neologisms, such as *co-alimentary*, *co-gustatory*, or the innumerable other possibilities, seems a needlessly pedantic exercise.
2. The comparative ethnographic focus of this chapter is limited to agrarian societies in Africa, as this presents a more than sufficiently complex array of issues. Those interested in the issue of feasting among "foragers" and "complex hunter-gatherers," including African examples, are directed to the works of Wiessner (1996) and Hayden (1990, 1996).
  3. All unreferenced descriptions of practices among the Luo people in this paper are derived from research conducted by Ingrid Herbich and me in western Kenya from 1980 to 1983 (see, e.g., Dietler and Herbich 1993; Herbich 1987, 1991; Herbich and Dietler 1991, 1993). Thanks are due to the National Science Foundation, the Wenner-Gren Foundation, the Boise Fund of Oxford University, the Office of the President of Kenya, the National Museums of Kenya, and especially our Luo and Samia hosts and our research assistants, Rhoda Onyango, Monica Oyier, and the late Elijah Ogotu.
  4. I owe the "metaproduction" formulation to an insightful comment by Terry Turner.
  5. Several French colleagues, in particular, have noted that the word "competition" evokes a strongly agonistic struggle for dominance with markedly negative connotations. Unfortunately, English lacks a convenient means to mark the subtle distinction between *compétition* and the more positively viewed *concurrence*. Hence, my use of the English term "competition" should be understood to cover the entire range of such possible relationships. My thanks to Pierre Lemonnier, Michel Py, and André Tchernia, in particular, for challenging me to clarify this usage.
  6. For the sake of simplicity, I use terms in this paper that are, in fact, specific to the territories of several Luo subgroups in Siaya district (such as the JoAlego). These terms vary in other areas. Similarly, the *siwanda* is not a formally defined space in the homesteads of all Luo groups.
  7. To avoid cluttering the text with multiple citations of the same work, I will simply point out here that the historical information in the following discussion is largely a selective summary of parts of Michael Whisson's (1961) excellent paper "The Rise of Asembo and the Curse of Kakia."
  8. I use the words "he" and "man" here purposely to indicate the gender-specific nature of these leadership roles. For one thing, Luo women are not members of the lineage into which they marry. Hence they do not have the genealogical standing to acquire authority in matters relating to the lineage of the area where they live after marriage.

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