

English Abstract

The Culture of Food: Anthropological Perspectives to the Study of Food

Although food is fundamental for our survival, it is never simply 'nutrition' – food always involves socially meaningful human action and choice. What counts as 'food' in any particular society is a matter of demarcation and categorization. In other words, eating is an essential part of human life, but the foods eaten, and the ways they are eaten, are always both expressions of cultural value systems and parts of the material processes that shape our social and cultural lives. What we eat and how we eat is decided by humans everywhere, and that decision in turn defines us as social and cultural beings. The book focuses both on the socio-cultural meanings and symbolic values that food carries, and on the ability of food to demarcate persons and social groups.

All the book's authors share the conviction that food has a remarkable ability to epitomize complex historical, political, ideological and economic powers which frame and are embedded in food preferences. The chapters explore the role of food in constructing kinship, expressing care and nurture, marking and symbolizing proper conduct, making and maintaining social groups or, more generally, serving as a focus for evaluation and judgement. These themes are connected by a perception that food is an element combining both material and symbolic domains, and as such is particularly well suited for building social relationships, groups and even persons. For anthropological research, it is thus essential to understand that although food is vital for human life, it not only nurtures individual bodies. Its power rests in the fact that it is an exceptional vehicle for conveying social and symbolic meanings as well as upholding social groups.

The ethnographic case studies provided in this book mostly discuss non-Western contexts. Their approach is typical for anthropological research more generally – they examine theoretically complex phenomena through detailed ethnographic data. The particularity of food as research material is demonstrated by the fact that that most of the authors have

collected their data while researching topics that had little to do with food and eating. Yet they end up drawing confident analyses on a variety of phenomena that find expression through the medium of food. In her article on market women in Kilimanjaro, Tuulikki **Pietilä** shows how food (in this case beer and meat) operates as a vehicle for moral talk. Pietilä demonstrates how allusions to women's beer drinking and meat eating in the market context express significant changes which have taken place in the gendered distribution of work. Her study also demonstrates how an individual's physical appearance becomes a public token of whether a person is a recipient of morally proper nurture. This is also one of the points Heidi **Härkönen** makes in her chapter on meanings and practices of food and its embodiment in Cuban family relationships. Härkönen argues that in Cuba, thinness becomes a sign of the lack of love and care, as well as of inadequate or harmful social relationships. She suggests that while food concretizes the more intimate social relationships, it also defines relationships between citizens and the state in a society where people expect the state to provide care and nurture. Tuomas **Tammisto** also shows how feeding creates kinship in ways that inseparably tie together the physiological and social dimensions of food. In his study about the Mengen of Papua New Guinea, Tammisto suggests that care materializes as food. The effects of food, Tammisto shows, are not only corporeal; food also has the potential to make strangers into relatives. Both Johanna **Pohjola** and Toomas **Gross** illustrate the remarkable ability of drinks to operate as key "summarizing" symbols. Such symbols condense the most fundamental meanings of a given cultural system into a particular symbolic form. Pohjola examines how as a key symbol, *mate* (a non-alcoholic drink containing caffeine), and the ritualized way it is consumed, represents friendship, connectedness and solidarity, expressing values and ideals connected to sociality in today's Argentina and representing Argentinianess "within" Argentina. Gross, for his part, analyzes the drinking of *mezcal* (a distilled alcoholic drink) in Oaxaca, Mexico, as an example of "constructive drinking" which creates male social groups by bringing men together. Given that *mezcal* is an "authentic symbol" of Oaxaca and is considered

to symbolize the essential nature of the local people, the drink also has the ability to mark off and disconnect “us” from “others”. Anu **Lounela**’s and Katja **Uusihakala**’s chapters both analyze the complexity of commensality, the sharing or not sharing of food. Their studies demonstrate that eating together and sharing food are two distinct issues, which may illuminate something essential about the social relationships involved. In Lounela’s study of Java, food is shared but it should not be eaten together. For the Javanese, food, and especially rice, represents desire and need – the opposite of the prevailing ideal of self-restraint. This contrasts with the ex-Rhodesian diaspora’s *bring and braai* food event examined by Uusihakala, in which eating together is morally stressed, although all the participants bring their own foods to the event and thus food is not shared. This practice expresses a lack of hierarchy and an ethos of equality and solidarity within the diaspora community, but also helps to create this egalitarian approach through practice. Not sharing and not offering food is a way of avoiding indebtedness. For example, within the I-Kiribati community that Petra **Autio** studied, sometimes the proper way to respond to food gifts is refusal, even though the predominant I-Kiribati ideology emphasizes hospitality and the sharing of food. This is controversial in light of the classical Maussian view that refusing to receive a food gift is equivalent to a declaration of war. Autio shows that refusal in these cases is a prerequisite for, and creator of, autonomy, thus demonstrating the cultural particularities in the ways in which food is used in creating social relationships and groups. In his study on Fiji, Matti **Eräsaari** focuses on reciprocal food exchanges, and points out that the physical properties of food have an effect on their symbolic value as well as on their exchangeability. In Fiji, taro and pigs are traditionally highly valued as exchangeable food gifts. The “heaviness” of both of these food items makes them particularly suitable for food exchange, since the fullness they bring about corresponds to the heaviness of moral indebtedness.

In sum, all the book chapters deal with the constructive powers of food, whether by foregrounding food’s role in symbolic action or its ability to bridge biological with social processes. They do so by looking

into food and drink as the material focus of what people do. This, in the final analysis, gives the articles in this volume the ability to demonstrate that food not only expresses social conditions and structures in various communities – it is not just a symbol or indicator of social solidarities and divisions; food also affects the world much more concretely. Food creates social worlds.