THEORIZING THE FEAST
RITUALS OF CONSUMPTION, COMMENSAL POLITICS, AND POWER IN AFRICAN CONTEXTS
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Feasts
ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND ETHNOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVES ON FOOD, POLITICS, AND POWER
Edited by Michael Dietler and Brian Hayden

“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 microdynamics 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 centralisation. For example, it is undoubtedly important to assess our understandings of complex institutional 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 these 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 evolutionary teleologies.

FEASTS, POLITICS, AND ARCHAEOLOGY

There has been much more 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 social action. Although as yet insufficiently understood, the "commensal politics" of feasting is a domain of social 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 that both feasts are inherently political and that they constitute a fundamental instrument for creating and managing political identities, let me explicitly emphasise 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 behoves us to explore critically this dimension of such a widespread cultural institution. However, before we are able to fully exploit this promising area 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 "institutions. A ritual act can be as simple as making the sign of the cross upon entering a house, pouring a few drops of beer on the threshold of a house as a libation, or throwing a mallet with 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 1986). 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 communal consumption constitutes the basic symbolic idiom, feasts have some distinctive properties (which, again, will be discussed in more detail later).

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 social and political roles played by feasts and the nature of their symbolic action. These different modes of commensal politics were labeled "entrepreneurial," "patron-role," and "disciplinary" 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 extend and further elucidate these theoretical constructs and explore their utility for archaeological interpretation.

I focus upon Africa for several reasons. The most obvious reason is that I have first-hand experience of it from having spent several years conducting ethnographic research there. More important than mere personal familiarity, how
ever, is the fact that Africa is the ethnographic terrain that has really given birth to po-
itical anthropology as a field (Amellle 1980; Moore 1994). Because so much re-
search during the colonial era was pragmatically driven from an early date by at-
tempts 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 Tit 1958), the African literature is unusually
rich in comparative observation and, insights into, structures of power and the
operation of politics. Despite the obvious cautious stance
that is 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 sin-
gled 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 (1967) as the prototypical land without "cuisine." His book Cooking, Cui-
none, and Class was largely about why African societies, even those that
highly stratified kingdoms, had not developed the kind of markedly differenti-
ated 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 under-
standing the archaeological interpretation of feasting. Likewise, several scholars
have recently suggested both that the nature of power in Africa differs funda-
mentally from that in "the West" (in that it is centered more around consump-
tion than around transformation), that is, the capacity to consume rather than
the ability to get people to do things (Schatzberg 1999:448), and that it is insepara-
ibly associated with metaphors of food and its consumption (see Huyart 1995;
accepting such broad generalizations and refutations, pointing out the tremen-
dous diversity of local political practices, strategies, and moral philosophies of power
in Africa. But, whether one ultimately accepts these arguments for African excep-
tionalism or not, what such examples indicate is that African societies do furnish
a challenging context in which to examine and refine theoretical constructs con-
cerning feasting and politics derived from broader surveys of ethnographic data.

FEASTS AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY

Before undertaking a more detailed analysis of the n?copolitical dimensions of
feasting ritual, or what may be called "commensal politics," I will begin with the
general observation that in Africa, as elsewhere, feasts serve a wide variety of im-
portant structural roles in the broader political economy. They create and main-
form to the "unnamed" ritual. 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 conscious and 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 "revolt" of assumptions that continue to underlie many archaeological interpretations: the ritual is a straightforward reflection of social and political structure and/or an inconceivably ephemerall aspect of the "supernatural" 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 community (Turner 1966; 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 1993b; 1993c). However, this relationship is also a complex one that has generated an extensive, and often contentious, literature in anthropology (cf. Apper 1992; Bell 1996; Bloch 1989; Cohen 1990; Co-
means of preparation that tend to amplify their significance in the important dramaturgical aspects of ritual (Dietler 1990). Moreover, this property of fermenta-
tion 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 (1980) metaphorically calls "symbolic capital" and economic capital. Public distribution and consumption of a basic seed derives added symbolic salience from its demonstration of confidence and managerial skill in the realm of pro-
duction. More importantly, however, consumption is played out in the extremely powerful idiom of communal hospitality. I believe this feature is crucial to un-
understanding the political dimensions of feasts, and it is for this reason that I have chosen to emphasize what I have called "commensal politics."

Anghie has asserted that "Commensality is not essentially about expressing love or intimacy" (1996:66-67), because it is clear that even individuals aggres-
sively 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 com-
petition by effectively euphemizing it in a symbolic practice that encourages col-
lective micronegation of the self-interested nature of the process. And at Boumbia it was 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 exis-
tence 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.

Hence, one begins to glimpse the symbolic force at the heart of communal ritu-
als. Feasts act as a form of symbolic "metaproduction," constituting and euphe-
mizing broader social relations in terms of the basic communal unit.

Furthermore, communal hospitality may be viewed as a specialized form of 
gift exchange that establishes the same relations of reciprocal obligation between

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 communal hospitality constitutes the syntax in the context of a ritual of con-
sumption. 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 1981:450) embodying relations of production and exchange and link-
ing the domestic and political economies in a highly personalized way. Moreover, 
almost eating and drinking are among the few biologically essential acts, they 
are never simply biological acts. Rather, they are learned "techniques du corps" (Mauss 1925)—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 essen-
tially food with certain psychoactive properties resulting from an alternative

power, and struggles over the control of representations and their interpretation 
by differentially situated actors are an important site of historical change. How-
ever, 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 ques-
tioning a shared vision of the social order that the feast reproduces and natural-
izes, 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. Be-
cause of their inherent emotive and symbolic power, feasts are very often inti-
mately 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 culturally sustained nature of feasts 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 
handed 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 1995; Perles 1996); 
and the political dimensions of feasting are somewhat different among foraging 
societies (see Hayden, Chapter 2; Wiessner 1996) than among the agrarian soci-
eties discussed here.

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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 lack of clear guidelines 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 communal hospitality. The exchange of food in this manner may take place completely outside of a communal-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 (communal consumption and nondestructive gift exchange) may take place at feasts, it is important to note that the analytical purposes of this discussion are 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).

Communal consumption (which, to reiterate, is here taken to be a definitive attribute of feasts) plus obvious limitations on the possibilities of the guest/recipient to redeploy the food (who 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 communal aspect, it is also a potentially even more subtle manipulation.

The critical point to retain is that communal 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, there are relations of reciprocal obligation that simultaneously serve to create and define differences in status. The relationship to guest, translates into a relationship of social superiority and inferiority unless and until the equivalent can be returned. As the Bembas [of Zambia] say, "You have eaten with us (the sticky gum from the manusa tree) and it sticks to your stomach... I... you ve filled your stomach with food from some one and it puts you under a permanent obligation to him" (Richards 1991:15). In this feature, the potential of hospitality to be manipulated as a tool in defining social relations, lies the crux of communal 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; Lemoine 1990; Modjeska 1984). 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 presentation it is perhaps the most effective at subverting the self-interested nature of the process and creating a shared "sincere fiction" (in Bourdieu's apt phrase) of disinterested generosity.

MODES OF COMMENAL POLITICS

I will now turn to some selected African examples of contexts in order to further explicate several previously defined theoretical constructs. Specifically, these different modes of communal 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 on 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" connotes 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 abstracted predictions of archaeological material (as far 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, 1999).

The first of these three modes of communal 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 quality. The first two work through the idioms of donor/receiver, superiority/subordinate relations within an inclusive binding exchange dyad, whereas the latter two work through the idioms of diachrotic 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 ties 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 position. 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 affirmation of the self-interested nature of the practice. It involves what Bourdieu characterizes as a "sincere fiction of disinterested exchange" (1984:216). Indeed, a major part of Bourdieu's argument about banquets is that the skill and grace of the genuinely competent social actors 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 elaboration of self-interest as an important aspect of ritualized forms of exchange, such as feasts.

Another preliminary precautionary 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 frontier territories in which the cultural coding of the term differs. 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 monopsony power, with resulting explicit "winners" and "losers." I have sought a more subtle and mind than the ideology of free-market capitalism or football! Nor are I referring only to feasts that involve an escalating scale of ostentatious reciprocal hospitality (of the well-known New Guinea "big man" type: see Lemert 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 communal 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 reflect 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 polyphony 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 inequality, 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 polychromous, 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 reenacted, 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, the more one moves 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 1966). Among the Dorse of Ethiopia, assumption of the title of halak'a, and its elevated political status requires the hosting of feasts so lavish that there is even some reluctance to undertake the initiation procedure (Helperin 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. Mowing up through this system requires the sponsorship of special feasts known as "castle 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. They 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 (Garde 1986).

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 integrative 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 (1958) has called "indirectness engineering" every bit as much as the presentation 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 Mandinka of Sierra Leone where the failure to return a yet-owed copious feast results in jarring and ridicule (Reidbach 1987). But it can be equally operative in cases where competitive manipulation is more subtly euphemized and where there is no escalation of pretense.

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. In 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 practiced 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 hostown the proceeds of the
day's labor. Before the development and spread of the capitalist monetary economy, such CWIs 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 extent 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 combatant 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 location 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 as a whole. Often, such histories are constructed by the host 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 more prehistoric societies) would generally have had very limited availability, 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 supplies 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 big men and other types of informal leaders is often cited in this connection (cf. Boissevain 1952; Ginsberg 1973; Friedman 1974; Lemoine 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 adapting 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 communal political activity in most societies, and especially to note the resources devoted to the production of alcoholic beverages for such purposes (see Dietler 1990:351–352). One frequently sees archaeological estimates of "substance" food production requirements that both ignore the importance of alcoholic beverages and do not take into account the social reproduction and politics into account. Yet, where attempts have been made to measure such things in ethnographic contexts, the figures are consistently impressive. Flagstad (1992), for example, noted that households in Botswana consumed some 15 to 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 remained isolated most of the time. Similarly, Richards (1975:60) 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 (15 liters) of millet beer per person each year, while annual consumption estimates for the city of Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso ran to 346 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, Garre (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 one's one-age-grade ceremonies: one needs 70 pots of beer (400 liters made from about 100 kg of cereal), plus another 50 kg of sorghum flour for 34 porridge balls, plus a number of cattle (that are worth up to $200 each); for a cattle dance, one needs 75 pots of beer, 30 porridge balls, and the most prestigious cattle; and for the funeral of a woman, one needs 37 pots of beer (Quine 1966). Similarly, Rothfuchs (1988) noted that, among the Mambilla 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 40 pots of beer (and 36 chickens) had been offered. In Mbang (a Mousi town of about 7,000 inhabitants in Burkina Faso), memorial ceremonies called kware are the occasions for the most lavish beer feasts. In one week, five kware were held in one ward, consuming 1,900 kg of red sorghum made into beer (with seven carloads 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 44 tons of grain brewed for beer (Paul 1980). Finally, among the Luo of Kenya, funerals are the occasions for the most lavish feasts mounting 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 anthropological conceptions of economically autonomous domestic units, it represents a substantial portion of domestic agricultural production that is regularly being sold or bartered 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 communal politics that may be distinguished I will call the "patron-role feast." This involves the formalized use of communal hospitality to symbolically reiterate and legitimate 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 1937; Sahlin 1972). The operative symbolic trope behind this form of political economy is essentially 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 its perpetuation by 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-a-vis the 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 communal 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 is an obligation so generally in a communal context is likely to be more than simply the responsibility of the king to maintain the ceremonial structure of the kingdom. The king expected to regularly host 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 (Brinton 1960). Similarly, among the Pondo of South Africa, Hunter noted that "Genority 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," Jokoti, is also the word in everyday usage for "thank you" (1960:387–388). Dillon provides a more detailed idea of the scale of such obligations among the Masa of Cameroon:

The foremost duty of a fua (village chief) in the minds of any Metis 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 fua 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 fua 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 fua to give them a feast simply because he was their leader.
Besides hosting the entire village on special occasions, the Jews frequently entertained individuals and small groups. He was expected to have wine ready for such visitors at any time, as well as for the release of (senior village notables) when they met on the village last 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 Jews continually received visitors—on week days, on village last 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 offer and reward allies as well as cultivate the maligned. At the same time, he gained prestige with the entire community by feeding it well. (Dilion 1990:139-140)

Similarly, among the Bemba of Zambia, Richards noted that the chief was responsible for feeding all those who provided tribute work on his career projects, couriers, 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 265 men and 374 women who provided labor and, among others, about 40 tribal councilors with their wives and retinue at least twice (1999:44). 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 kileo" (1999:48). 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 oti and in the village or household" (1999:48). Correspondingly, the failure of a chief to provide food for his subordinates 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 1999:244).

It is important to emphasize that this kind of practice is not, as has sometimes been posited in functional accounts, necessarily a systematically adaptive means of providing balanced food security for a population. Rather, it is first and foremost a political and symbolic device for legitimating status differences, and any nutritional benefits to the population at large are highly variable (see Friedman 1984; Hayden and Gargett 1980; Pryor 1977). This political function is underlined by the fact that challenges to chieftcy authority can also be launched through feasting. Angbo (1990) 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 chieftship 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 awar (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 1981:345-346, Richards 1999; Schapper 1998). 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 Chaga 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 core 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 (1999) notes 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 250 women days per year were required for the gardens of one smaller chief for cutting and clearing branches, respectively (1999:388). 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 food in the capacity of a diacritical symbol to naturalize and reify concepts of ranked differences in the status of social orders or classes (cf. Eliot 1978; Goody 1978; 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-
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Ginés and significance of cuisine. According to Goody, the development of such diachrotical culinary practices is often linked to the development of specialized food preparers for the elite class (replacing wives in this role, who became commercial partners), and commercial 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 diachrotical feast mode. Although Goody's dichotomy may be an overly broad generalization, it is clear that the practice of diachrotical feasting transforms elite feasts into what Appadurai (1986:25) calls "tournaments of value," which serve both to define elite status membership and to channel social competition within clearly defined boundaries. Diachrotical 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 (1986) 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 attenuated 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 result can be the gradual spread through a society of foods and food practices by what Appadurai (1986) has described as a "turbulent effect." This happened in ancient Greece with the expansion of the symposium (wine-drinking party) from its aristocratic origins throughout urban society (Denzler 1981; Murray 1996), and it was a common feature in the development of European bourgeois manners and food culture (Bourdieu 1986; Elias 1978). Junker (Chapter 10) offers another example among Philippine chieftains.

Such emulation, and the resulting devaluation of diachrotical significance, can be thwarted only by the imposition of customary 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 monopo-

ization, the weakening of diachrotical 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-

orste, 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 diachrotical feast patterns precisely because, according to Goody (1981a), 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." (Goody 1986:188).

However, although it is true that African societies do not appear to have developed highly elaborated diachrotical cuisines to the same extent as the states of Eu-

rope and Asia, they are not without diachrotical food practices that serve to symbolically demarcate kings, chiefs, and nobles. Often African royal or noble culinary distinctions are expressed in the form of special food avoidance or privi-

ced 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 foods thought to be of low status (e.g., sweet potatoes, cassava, and certain vegetables), and the men he appointed as "crows 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 alternat-

ing periods of service in the palace (Beattie 1980). Among the Mbam of Cameroon, the fom (village chief) has exclusive rights to receive, butcher, and dis-

pose 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 no-

tables (Dillon 1900:135-136, 153-157). Among the Mamprussi of Ghana, the king ob-

serves 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 1979:158-159). Among the Bemba of Zambia, even when traveling, a chief cannot eat cooked food offered by his subjects because "porridge cooked on 'impre' fire would endanger his life" (Richards 1910:159). 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
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also noted how various guests were treated, depending on their statuses and rela-
tions with the host (1990:180).

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
insiders versus stranger distinctions. Concepts of ethnicity, for example, very fre-
quently involve beliefs (of variable accuracy) about distinctive food tastes and
culinary practices. The Luo love fish and know that this distinguishes them from
their Kisi neighbors to the east who eschew fish. They also believe that these own
revolutions 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 culi-
nary distinctions in the expression of sentiments of inclusion and exclusion at
various levels.

Alas, the situation is yet more complicated for archaeologists looking for evi-
dence of what are here defined as diachronic feasts because similar symbolic de-
cives 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 diachronic feasts for those used to differentiate
social classes in societies having diachronic feasts. In many cases, this former dis-
tinction (i.e., marking feasts as ritual events) is accomplished simply by differ-
ences 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 em-
ployed to distinguish ritual from quotidian practice by serving as "framing de-
vices" that act as cues establishing the ritual significance of events (see Miller
1986b:281-283). 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 cloth
or other bodily adornments), or special architectural staging, may be employed
for this marking purpose. To use the Luo as an example again, they have a distinc-
tive paired set of very large beer pots (called ngbog and gug bung) that are used
only at important feasts (Herbst and Dieter 1989, 1992). Hence, among the Luo,
beer, beef, and certain kinds of ceramic vessels are all indissoluble markers of feasts
as ritual events. Finally, asympotic complexity in recipes or in the structured order
of service and consumption may also be used to invoke such distinctions (see
Douglas 1986).

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

respective staffs, but only a chief's head wife could send a royal visitor dishes of
prestige and relish" (Richards 1990:180). 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 al-
enways eats in seclusion and his food and meals are referred to only in euphemisms
(Boston 1968:204-205).

Hence, diachronic 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 mu-
rels 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 cer-
tain institutionalized political roles rather than social classes. Nevertheless, such
practices do perform the ritual work noted above of reinforcing asymmetrical rela-
tions of power through the symbolic manipulation of food consumption in a pat-
ttern 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 diachronic feasts requires some further
cautions clarification. This is because nearly all feasts actually serve in some way
to define social boundaries while simultaneously creating a sense of community.
That is, nearly all feasts serve to mark, reify, and inculcate diachronic distinctions
between social groups, categories, and statuses while at the same time establish-

...
archaeologist to distinguish readily between "diachronic feasts" and these other boundary-marking practices (i.e., those marking both boundaries between social groups and categories and boundaries between ritual and mundane 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 "diachronic feasts" marking social classes and the diachronic 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 "diachronic 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 tableware 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 diachronic feasts. This may simply be related to an increasing "commodification" of food-consumption patterns (in the sense of Douglas 1982) through more marked symbolic emphasis on distinctions such as that between ritual and quotidian doing practice. The diachronic 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 parenthesis 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, reaffirmed, 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 1978; Child, Barry, and Bacon 1969; Coumound and Kaplan 1986; Dietler 1990; Gesso-Madaniou 1992; Herberl 1992; McDonald 1992). As the Luso example discussed below illustrates (cf. Karp 1980; Ngokweyi 1987; for other African examples), such categorical boundary marking at feasts may be based upon various permutations of symbolic dialectica, 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 diachronic 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 (1976) noted a frequent pattern in which, with the development of endogamous social classes marked by restricted communal circles and diachronic cultural practices, one often notes a shift in the position of women of the elite class from food servers and preparers to communal 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 is, 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 gendered 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. Boesegard 1972; Clark 1980; Friedman 1984; Gosevich 1978; Lemonnier 1990; Vincent 1971; also see Dietler and Herberl, Chapter 8).

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 (Boyarup 1993; Geyer 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 1984). 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 firm exploited class (Mellassouk 1978). 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 a frequently used analytical term, it 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 communal relations with the gods (e.g., see Gero 1991; March 1998). And, in many societies, women do host their own work feasts and other 2nd 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 preponderance of important women." If a woman calls a big hoisting party and supplies generous amounts of food and beer, she will be called "important woman" (Shagba Bowa) for months afterwards" (Bohannan and Bohannan 1968:275). Finally, the common traditional female monopolization of cooking and brewing responsibilities, with the penetration of the monetized market econ-
omy, 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 intramarital power under changing socioeconomic conditions (e.g., see Cotter and Scudder 1986; Netting 1994).

The relationship between feasts and gender is clearly a complex but analyti-

cally rich and important one. Feasts are intimately implicated in the representa-
tion, reproduction, and transformation of gender identity, as well as in the gen-
dered 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 communal pol-
tics outlined earlier, because it is also necessary to say a few words about the rela-
tionships of these modes to each other. The first thing to emphasize is that they should probably 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, diachractical feasts, as defined here, are generally a fea-
ture encountered exclusively among state societies—but not all states will have di-
achronical feasts). However, rather than describing a series of successive evolu-
tional stages, these feasting modes should be viewed as constituting a pro-
gressively expan $$v$$ sive repertoire of forms of political action through feasting. One form does not replace another; some forms simply expand the range of communal 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 communal politics. However, societies in which diachractical feasts are found are also certain to have each of the other two forms as well. In other words, where cuisine is used as a diachronic symbolic device separating classes, the politics of communality 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 communal hospitality in the patron role pattern to legitimate institutionalized political au-
thority 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 insti-
tutionalized patrons (e.g., "kings") to maintain the authority vested in their roles does not preclude the use of hospitality by others to define their relative sta-
tuses 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 "fetive landscape" in any given society will most likely be a palimpsest of several different modes of communal politics operating in different contexts.
RITUALS OF CONSUMPTION: COMMENSAL POLITICS, AND POWER IN AFRICAN 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 estab-
lishing a traditional 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 differ-
ent degrees by the sharing of food. It is really the extent of institutionalized acceptance, or expectation, of a continuing pattern of unreipreciated or unbal-
anced hospitality that defines the difference. As the example in the following sec-
lon will show, there is often a subtle distinction between the two, and it is not dif-
ficult 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 con-
mflict may actually be created when groups approach such feasts with different under-
standings 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 partic-
ularly a risk with feasting across cultural boundaries, where, 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 cons-
ciously by individuals or groups who are quite aware of the conventions but
who, for example, choose to challenge chieflty authority by refusing to acknow-
ledge a patron-role feast as such and treating it instead in the competitive empow-
ering 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 deictical 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 cate-
gories 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 deictical devices. But these other distinctions are established
without commensal networks through variations in food-sharing practices. What
are here called “deictical feasts” represent a special kind of boundary-defining prac-
tice based upon commensal exclusion that I believe is sufficiently different and
heuristically valuable to merit distinguishing categorically. As pre-studies of pre-
historic European contexts have shown (see Dietler 1996, 2004), it can be a pro-
ductive category for archaeological analysis.

LUO FEASTS

In order to further clarify some of the more abstract points made earlier, I will
briely treat several aspects of feasting among the Luo of western Kenya in some-
what 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 km2 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 patriarchal patrilineal resi-
dence pattern (see Dietler and Herbich 1989, 1995; Evans Pritchard 1949; Herbich

Agriculture provides the base of their diet, and this is carried out by women in
clustered 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 in
clude 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 pur-
chased fish and sporadic “tanger” buying and selling of game at the local markets,
most households grow most of the food they eat. There is little reliance on food
stuffs 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 repertory of dishes, and there are regional and family preferences for recipes.
The main meals are constituted around a thick, bread-like porridge (called kawm)
made from boiled sorghum or maize flour. This is the symbolically central in-
gredient of the diet, and a Luo who has not eaten kawm will say that he has
not eaten. Various stew-like dishes made from vegetables, fish, or meat serve es-
sentially as a condiment to kawm. Snacks and lesser meals consist of a maize
and bean mixture (nyopu), a thin millet or maize porridge (nqyuu), sweet potatoes
and sour milk, and other such dishes. The main alcoholic beverage is beer
(keng’o) made from millet and/or maize, although a distilled alcohol known as
chang’tsi 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 1992), or what Shipron (1992:275) 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 kien and other foods. They are accompanied by ritual dramaturgical practices such as prancing 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., Mbita 1998).

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 beef (and/or chung'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 awanda that serves as the place where apeke nett at feasts gather together to drink beer and eat. At feasts of utmost importance, these elders will consume unfiltered beer out of a special large pot called a shug (fig. 3.1). A shug 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 awanda. The men sit around the pot in a circle drinking from long straws (ndere) made of hollow vine stems with a woven filter on the end (fig. 3.1). The possession of a personal straw, which one carries to
drying sinaho (a processed grain flour product resulting from an initial stage in the chaine 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 grains to mount a feast. Women are the agricultural and culinary labor force that lie 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 boxes 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 Mbunda (Nigeria) bear feasts (Reh-
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, sitho, 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 actualized positions of authority and power varied somewhat from region to region.

Whisson (1962) 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. "Traditional Luo political organization has been described as a classic case of the segmentary lineage system (Evans-Pritchard 1940; 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 fractional 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 fractional struggles during the immediately precolonial and early colonial era in Asembo, the territory of the Luo subgroup known as JoAsenbo along the north coast of the Wimere 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 gweng's. Disputes thus could not be settled peacefully were resolved by fusion 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 re-
cure the support of weaker "jutäk" (tenant) lineage groups that had settled in their territory after being forced out or fleeing elsewhere.

Hence, as Whisson (1962:7) 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 (bulu) was particularly important in winning prestige in the sphere of warfare. Jutäk (magicians) were feared and respected for their powers of divination even 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 kites, 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 petted 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 household for agricultural and culinary labor, so that wealthy men were able to 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 , the leader" (1962:7).

The strongest leaders would be able to draw upon all three of the mutually enhancing sources of power noted above. But a skilled jutäk from a well-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. This 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 beasts 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 firm view of augmenting income through tributry. As in the case of an early Aembo chief named Odindo, those who were unable to keep up the lavish hospitality that people expected of a traditional suich sometimes fell from power in the face of continual scheming by rivals from other lineages (Whisson 1962:11). 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 such successful chiefs today are still conspicuously more polygynous than the rest of their people. For example, one chief in our research area had 12 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 communal 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-tribute system; 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, oracular 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 communal 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 anthropologists, 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 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 1999, 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.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
My thinking on this issue has been evolving for over a decade, and it has greatly benefited from the opportunity to receive challenging comments on different papers exploring this theme from audiences in a variety of contexts, most particularly the ‘Food and the Status Quo’ symposium at the Ringberg Castle of the Max Planck Institute in Germany (1991), the ‘Les Princes de la Protohistoire et l’Emergence de l’État’ symposium at the Centre Jean-Baptiste de Naples, Italy (1992), a seminar while visiting professor at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (1996), the SAA symposium that generated this book (1998), and a symposium on ‘Consuming Power: Feasting as Continental Politics’ convened at Cornell University (1999) in which my work served as a keynote for lively critical discussion. I am grateful to all the participants of these various sessions for their comments (including those with whom I disagree), and more particularly to Michel Pelet, Maurice Godelier, Brian Hayden, Pierre Lemennex, Jean-Paul Morel, Michel Py, Virginia Rusel, André Tchernia, Terry Turner, and Polly Wiener. Special thanks are due to Ingrid Herthich for generous sharing of data and invaluable intellectual collaboration.

NOTES
1. To avoid possible confusion, I note that emphasis that I use the word ‘consumed’ in its original sense, rather than its peculiar biological adaptation. The word derives from the Latin ‘consumere,’ indicating the sharing of a table—hence, eating together. It is true 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 1949:119-36). However, despite the minor drawback of being grounded in a Eurocentric cultural trope, the term ‘consumed’ does provide a convenient way of indicating a range of forms of communal food consumption. Other possible alternative terms in common usage, such as adjetival expressions of ‘eating’ (indicating the sharing of bread, from Latin) and synonyms (the sharing of a drink, from Greek), have even more problematic semantic histories and associational problems. And the game of inventing neologisms, such as co-alimentary, co-gourmandise, 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 Wiener (1996) and Huyssen (1999, 1998).
3. All uneaten well-baked foods of practices among the Luo people in this paper are derived from research conducted by Ingrid Herthich and me in western Kenya from 1980 to 1985 (see, e.g., Godelier and Herthich 1995; Herthich 1987, 1991, 1992; Huyssen; and Dietler 1999, 1993). Thanks are due to the National Science Foundation, the Wenner- Gren Foundation, the Bose Fund of Oxford University, the Office of the President of Kenya, the National Museums of Kenya, and especially to our Luo and Sianta hosts and our research assistants, Rhoda Osungo, Mary Oyer, and the late Elijah Oguta.
4. I owe the ‘metaproduction’ formulation to an insightful comment by Terry Turner.
5. Several French colleagues, in particular, have noted that the word ‘compétition’ evokes a strong agonistic struggle for dominance with markedly negative connotations. Unfortunately, English lacks a convenient means to mark the subdialectation between competition 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. These terms vary in other areas. Similarly, the siohoto is not a formally defined space in the homesteads of all Luo groups.
6. 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 Wharton’s (1976) excellent paper ‘The Rise of Antsirabe and the Curse of Kakka.’
7. I use the words ‘host’ and ‘guest’ 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 to the area where they live after marriage.
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