

Anne SHARMAN, Janet THEOPHANO, Karen CURTIS, and Ellen MESSER (editors), *Diet and Domestic Life in Society* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1991, 287 pp., ISBN 0-87722-751-9)

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Diet and Domestic Life in Society evolved from a Symposium held ten years ago at an American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting. In contrast to many others on the topic of diet and nutrition where the nutrient intake of subjects is abstracted and discussed, this book focuses on ordinary persons as actors, agents and subjects in the domestic unit and their performance and interaction in working out diet and nutrition in everyday life. For folklorists, it shows foodways as an integral part of dynamic creative culture.

Its stated purpose is to influence another process, that of formulating nutrition policies, from a micro rather than the usual macro perspective. Policies and intervention programs now look at inputs and outputs but neglect process and the realities of life with respect to users of social programs. The authors as nutritional anthropologists believe that through attending to the facts of people's lives rather than economic theory and impersonal models, policies could be more effective in improving health and nutritional status.

Three principale themes are interwoven and provide a framework for reviewing the work of the several contributors: first, how the subjects of the various studies as actors make use of food items, relationships, roles and kin in providing food for the "domestic" unit; second, how they are enabled or constrained by the ecological context, the community, and their use of time; and third, how they are shaped by the culture, economics and politics of their society.

Eight of the eleven chapters are concerned with a different spatial and social unit of study; Malaysia, Mexico, Guatemala, Bangladesh, Belize, India, and, in a large city in the United States, Italian-Americans and Afro-Americans. The authors bring differing perspectives, backgrounds of experience and knowledge, and also differing research objectives and foci. Their methodologies are primarily qualitative including participant observation, informal interviewing, and oral histories. Data is derived from the late 1970s. Whether or not conditions are the same today within these locales, the several chapters do give vivid accounts of the variety of ways used by households in food provisioning.

"Getting Through (Three) Meals a Day..." by Ellen Messer covers the tenth year of an ongoing study in a town of 9,000 in Oaxaca, Mexico. About half the households formerly grew maize, beans and squash, but at the time of the study most bought their food and needed cash income. The principale action is women's cash procuring activities tied to domestic life and their use of time. Women's cash income buys food, men's is used for other expenses.

The overall impression here is gloomy. Household work is seen as drudgery — children, especially adolescent girls, help a lot and the author notes, “Even boys may be asked to do ‘women’s work’”. If children are fed by neighbours or grandparents, this is seen as “foraging”, seemingly, from the author’s point of view a second-rate method of obtaining food compared to purchasing. There is little evidence of joy or celebration in this chapter — a comment about a funeral suggests that ritual and festive occasions are a detrimental influence on family food supply. Festivals interrupt cash work.

In contrast to this negative connotation of “foraging”, in “Where the Wild Things Are”, a survey of four communities in Malaysia, gathering the wild is seen by author Carol Laderman as a pleasant activity, part of children’s playtime and not considered work by either the children or the elders. Yet wild species collected by children and adults form a surprisingly large proportion of the diet. Through studying the activities of these women and children, Laderman is able to look beyond accepted generalizations; although Malays consider fish and rice to be “the only essential foods”, she counted 72 varieties of wild plants being eaten. The importance of these wild foods varies with the season, being most important when staple foods are scarce or economically less available.

Seasonality and subsistence activities in the ongoing social life of a village in Guatemala are also cited by Mary Scrimshaw and Sheila Cosminsky in their competent nutrition study of 35 households in a sugar/coffee plantation. Through their use of case studies, they show empathy for women’s situation and offset the cool objectivity of their empirical data. A particular focus in this study is the influence of poor health of the focal woman of the household on the quality of the diet of the family. Although men do take part in planting corn and the main harvest, women, with some help from children, do the rest. They gather wild foods, fish and small game. They manage and use other food resources such as gifts, food exchanges, free foods, and food rations from the plantation owner, and they activate and use kin ties. Exchanges between households depend on kinship relations; if this support is absent, then the household has more difficulties, and health is poorer. The authors point out that men may be constrained from participating in informal food provision by their work patterns which remove them from everyday domestic activities or remove them spatially from the community.

In “Kin Ties, Food, and Remittances...” Joseph Palacio describes a community in Belize where, in about one third of the households, not only men but both parents leave to work elsewhere. The children stay in the community and are dependent on food fosterage, usually by grandparents, and cash remittances sent by the parents. The functioning of this system depends on a caretaker being physically able and in good health to do the work of looking after the children; the children being old enough to take part in food procuring activities; regular remittances of cash from absentee parents; and the caregivers being responsible

in living up to their obligation towards the children. Palacio shows clearly that the viability of the community itself is dependent on this system of providing food and the carrying out of these social obligations, since it no longer provides cash producing employment for its people.

Najma Rizvi adds the influence of social stratification to the complex fabric of foodways. She contrasts the different sets of cultural rules for rich and poor in examining the structuring of a food system in two communities in Bangladesh, one rural and one urban. She points out that the impact of culture depends on a person's place in the social strata, and identifies the main problem in food provisioning as poverty, not lack of knowledge and not a low value placed on health.

From fieldwork in an Indian village 130 miles from Bombay, Arjun Appadurai describes women's "dietary improvisation" and food managing activities in the context of an agricultural economy where seasonality, migration, and other contingencies, Hindu beliefs and practices are salient in food provisioning. Appadurai provides a thoughtful discussion of methodology and describes that used in his study as one that "glosses and represents" individual cases in order to arrive at an interpretation that "typicalizes lived experience."

In this Hindu setting, community and large scale social celebration leave a burden of financial and social debt for months and even years to come. However, these are a deeply meaningful form of give and take, the stuff of social relations, at levels ranging from the family to the village and beyond, "networks lubricated through the reciprocities of food". This chapter is well written, tuned in to the local context without imposing North American value-based judgments.

"Sisters, Mothers and Daughters: Food Exchange and Reciprocity in an Italian-American Community" also emphasizes the role of ritual in foodways. The scene is Easter week in a Philadelphia suburb. Women as the guardians of domestic ritual are involved in female networks where decisions about ritual occasions are made. This community is seen here by the authors Janet Theophano and Karen Curtis as a series of these networks, defined to a considerable extent by food exchanges and reciprocity. Celebration is through and within these women's networks rather than community wide as in Appadurai's study. Food exchanges, including shared cost, prepared foods, raw items and leftovers, help in provisioning and are a token of social bonding, integral to all social interaction. The result is the development of a food system that is "shared albeit transformed".

Another "shared albeit transformed" food system is transcribed by Anne Sharman in "From Generation to Generation..." a study of five Afro-American households in a large northeastern U.S. city. Her data from case studies and life histories shows the complexity of daily diet in this large city, and the interfacing of social structure, roles, and role obligations between kin and friends, and cash income in food provisioning. Diet derives from a repertoire they share rather than particular patterns of eating. It reflects the historical experience of African-

Americans with a complex make-up of southern food, soul-food, Muslim food, and health food. Cooking skills keep alive food traditions which foster a sense of identity as well as the ability to function and to acquire a healthful food supply.

In comparing the different methodologies used, we ponder the question of the influence of the chosen methodology on the findings of a study. Would a method closer to the women of Oaxaca and more expressive of their own perceptions have shown a little joy in their lives along with the misery? "Decision Analysis in Nutrition Studies" by Sutti Ortiz adds to the book not because its economic decision-making model is a useful tool, but because its author gives a good critique of the limitations of the model and when its use is inappropriate. In most of the studies in this book, such a deterministic model would have forced the researcher into more of an outsider, so-called objective stance, and shown only thin rather than the thick textured realities of the dynamic food systems worked out in the domestic domain.

The authors' work shows differences in their nutrition knowledge. It is not without bias, not unaffected by their own beliefs. Although the editors point out the relevance of this work for other disciplines, they could very well also consider the benefits of collaborative work with other disciplines, such as folklore studies. Personally I found much on which to reflect: different methods showing complexities of foodways; degrees of insider/outsider participation; varying interpretations of the richness of dietary improvisation; and the inventiveness of the human spirit in solving problems of diet in domestic life.

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Elizabeth THOMPSON, *The Pioneer Woman: A Canadian Character Type*, (Montréal, McGill-Queen's, 1991, \$34.95 cloth, ISBN 0-7735-0832-5)

In her fiction and non-fiction, Catherine Parr Traill wrote about pioneer women rising to the challenges of settling a new land. Elizabeth Thompson argues that this depiction did more than introduce prospective English emigrants to the realities of Canadian life. With her portrayal of the "pioneer woman" Traill