

The Thinness of Bulls: Food, Sexuality and Masculinity in Samburu, Northern Kenya

Jon D Holtzman¹

¹Western Michigan University, Department of Anthropology, Kalamazoo, USA

jon.holtzman@wmich.edu

In this paper I examine discourses and practices linking food and sexuality among Samburu herders in northern Kenya. This case study builds on and contrasts with varied African examples where food and eating are closely tied to sexuality. Sex and food constitute the most basic human needs and are arenas that typically bring together the genders even where male and female spheres are rather distinct. Examples abound where sex and food are tightly interwoven in symbol and practice: The cooking hearth, hot and life-giving, is often a potent metonym for fertility and sexuality; gendered patterns of food sharing may symbolize and define a sexual unit; foods sensuousness can spur synesthetic connections with sexuality, whether in “spiciness,” “sweetness,” or simply the act of eating.

In contrast, Samburu gastronomic-sexual connections tend to be far less positive. The framing context is chronic food scarcity, which causes Samburu adults of both genders to be significantly underweight, with a marked tendency for Samburu men to become thinner in absolute terms and relative to their wives as they age. Both genders discuss this nutritional process in terms that link sexual politics with gastropolitics. Women are culturally sanctioned to control food distribution within the typically polygynous Samburu household, such that men are largely dependent on their wives for daily sustenance. At the same time, men are responsible for what Samburu construe as a sometimes undesirable form of labor, procreative sexuality to ensure their wives fertility. Thus, male thinness is frequently framed as the consequence of the fact that “men must do their work (i.e. sex) whether they have eaten or not.” Men in particular frame this within a bovine idiom, comparing their own thinness to that of their bulls who become emaciated while mating with many cows, expending considerable energy while having inadequate time to graze. Moreover, men are also seen as becoming nutritionally vulnerable when post-childbearing wives no longer need their husbands, or as men themselves age and become less capable of providing sexually for younger wives. The paper thus considers the reasons underlying the link between the gastronomic and sexual in diverse contexts across Africa, and the ways that this contrasting example sheds new light on this potent connection.