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

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Introduction

My friend and age mate Lelelit motioned to the cattle grazing in the field before us, as I asked him to explain the cause of the excessive thinness that he had just noted as being characteristic of many Samburu men. "Hai!" he exclaimed. "Isn't he a bull? Alas, that is just how it is with bulls. A bull is just the one that is always mounting that cow." I wondered why this "work" of sexuality didn't have a thinning effect on women, as well, since they were engaging in the same activity. Lelelit quickly dismissed that notion, noting for cows (as well as for the reputably sexually passive Samburu women): "She does not have that job because it is just this bull that is "killing" her. It is just this bull that keeps on killing her, and there is nothing she does to him. Even as for barren cows, even with them it makes them fat. Its those bulls, it's the persistent mounting of those bulls that fattens those cows."

In this paper I examine links between food and sexuality, in discourse and practice, among Samburu pastoralists in northern Kenya. Although chronic food scarcity causes adults of both genders to on average be moderately to chronically underweight, I focus here on the tendency—observed both informally by myself and my informants, and confirmed through biometric data--of Samburu men, as they age, to become thinner in absolute terms and relative to their wives. This nutritional process is discussed by members of both genders in terms that link sexual politics with gastropolitics within the typically polygynous Samburu households, drawing on a range of discourses that includes a bovine idiom comparing the thinness of men to that of their bulls, who become emaciated while mating with many cows, expending considerable energy while having inadequate time to graze.

The Samburu example both builds on and provides a contrast with contexts in Africa and around the world where food is frequently linked in discourse and practice to issues of sexuality. In varying forms, food often serves as a metaphor for sexual relations or as an index for sexuality, licensed or illicit. Sex and food, after all, not only constitute the most basic of human needs but are also an arena that typically brings the genders together, even in societies where the spheres of women and men tend to be rather distinct. Examples of this are various. The heat and life giving properties of the cooking hearth are frequently treated as a potent metonym for both fertility and the sexuality, frequently giving rise to both prescriptions and prohibitions concerning the act of cooking that mirror those concerning sexuality. Gendered transfers of food can both symbolize and define a sexual unit for procreative or other purposes. The sensuality of food can render rich synaethesic connections between it and sexuality, whether in terms of sensations ranging from heat to spiciness to sweetness or in simply the act of eating itself.

Samburu show marked contrast to these examples in a number of ways. Most immediately—unlike most examples emphasizing the tastiness of food, and the sexiness of sexuality—food is framed here as a scarce resource, where in a context of chronic hunger its presence or absence can mean life or death, while male sexuality is frequently framed as a not particularly desirable form of labor, especially when food scarcity leads men to have eaten nothing or very little. “You know the thing that can make men thin? “ my friend Lekanapan asked me rhetorically. “They have their work to do (i.e. having sex with their wives) whether they have eaten or not.” That is, his procreative responsibilities, “that work” exist irrespective of his access to food. Although I would hasten to emphasize that this is not the only arena through which either sexuality or thinness is discussed, it is a particularly intriguing one, particularly in its contrast to more common links forged between food and sexuality in African ethnography.

Ethnographic Background

Samburu are pastoralists living in the semi-arid regions of north central Kenya, currently numbering around 200,000. Although traditionally they survived mainly on the products of their herds, over the past three or so decades they have come to increasingly

rely on purchased agriculture products—particularly maize meal, sugar and vegetable fat—to supplement, or in some areas form the basis of their diet. As space does not allow for a broad ethnographic overview here, I will focus on those aspects most relevant to the relationship of food and sexuality, specifically the ways in which the domestic unit is constructed both vis a vis gastrological and sexual dimensions.

Samburu are typically polygynous, with a significant difference in ages between husbands and wives. Polygyny is facilitated by the institution of murranhood, in which young men from approximately the age of 15-30 live as bachelor warriors (Spencer 1965), unmarried and with food prohibitions that by and large keep them outside of domestic consumption (Holtzman 2002). Given differences in the age of marriage, there will always be more marriageable/married females than males. Men choose their wives, negotiating with male kin of the bride for permission to wed and for the amount of bridewealth to be paid, while women have little say in marital choice. The result of this is that a typical Samburu household will be composed of a Samburu man, a first wife roughly 10-15 years younger than her husband, one of two subsequent wives who might range anywhere from 15-60 years younger, and all their children. Each wife has her own house, which she has built herself out of local materials, and this is the principal site of food consumption. In the case of dairy products, she milks her livestock and divides it into separate calabashes for the consumption of each family member, while cooked food is similarly divided into shares for each family member. Despite an overall emphasis on the authority of elders (i.e. married men) in Samburu society, this does not extend to domestic food consumption (Holtzman 2002). Men are expected to the essentially oblivious to the amount of food in the home, except as directed by the wife, and to not insinuate themselves in the woman's business of food allocation. For a man to complain that he has been given inadequate food is a particularly unseemly intrusion into domestic food division, not only because food is culturally considered an altogether inappropriate source of conflict, and moreover because it gives the appearance that the man is more concerned about his own stomach than the children under his care.

How does this play out in domestic food allocation? It should be noted that chronic food scarcity is a feature of Samburu life that is longstanding but also reworked in the context of the contemporary decline in the pastoral economy and heavy reliance on

agriculture products. There are several consequences of this scarcity that play out in clear ways, and others in more complex or ambiguous ones. The clearest consequence is that the vast majority of adults of both genders are mildly to severely underweight by international standards, and that in both genders nutritional well being declines with age. In their 20s, both men and women are reasonably well fed, generally falling close to a BMI of 20, which is considered to be ideal by Western nutritional standards. However, as men and women age—and their households acquire more mouths to feed, their nutritional status declines. This is complex process, which occurs for a variety of reasons and is expressed in a variety of ways. By and large, based on biometric data, men are on average affected more than women. Moreover, Samburu informants tend to identify elders as the thinnest age-gender category, and elderly men in particular are, based on both qualitative and quantitative data, the group for whom food deprivation is the clearest. However, I would hasten to add that there are many Samburu women who are very, even dangerously thin, and that a substantial minority of informants (of both genders) portrays women as the group most afflicted by food scarcity. I would emphasize then, that the processes and discourses I describe are not the only ones either regarding food or its connections to sex, but are ones that are both important and provide key contrasts with ethnography and analysis from elsewhere in Africa and around the world.

Sex and Food in Comparative Perspective

Sex and food have been closely linked in a range of anthropological studies of Africa, as well as elsewhere in the world. Clark's (1989, 1994) studies of Asante women traders provide one of the most compelling portraits of the relationship of food and sexuality in the ethnography of Africa, illustrating the powerful relationship between cooking and sex, a relationship found elsewhere in West Africa (Robertson 1984). Cooking for a man is both metaphorically and literally construed as synonymous with sexual relations, both within and outside of marriage. "Eating" in the Asante language is a widely used metaphor for sexual relations, and cooking for a man is considered to be part and parcel of having sex with him. In polygynous marriages, co-wives take turns cooking dinner for their husband, which is also a means through which equality in sexual attention is ensured. In courtship,

beginning to cook for a man is tantamount to begin an informal relationship on a potential path to formal marriage. Husbands who appear to have lost their appetite raise concerns that they have, literally and figuratively been "eating elsewhere." Similar dynamics are seen in other parts of Africa, as well as elsewhere in the world. Among the !Kung (Howell 2010) the cooking hearth is seen as a powerful metaphor for fertility and sexuality, such that sharing a cooking hearth is seen to represent sexual relations and, indeed, the onset of informal marriage itself. Similar dynamics are seen in other contexts across the globe (Counihan 1999), as well as in the widely spoken English truism that maintains that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach.

Such studies are valuable, well-documented, and well argued, but also present only part of the picture, which this examination of Samburu seeks to problematize. There are several key differences in this case study, both empirically and regarding the perspective I employ. First, sex itself is cast in quite a different light from most studies. Just as studies of food tend to focus on "tasty things" (Holtzman 2006; 2009) studies of sex—at least in the absence of clear violence or oppression—is largely construed as a "sexy" topic. While I am not suggesting that Samburu view sex exclusively in negative terms, in the contexts I focus on here it is frequently construed as not particularly desirable labor by men in particular. Second, Samburu differ from examples such as the Asante and the !Kung to the extent that their relationships are relatively inflexible. Samburu marriages are arranged, and—with some marginal exceptions—they are stuck with working out the terms of a marriage in which there is for the most part No Exit. Thus in examples elsewhere sex and food may be bound together as two sides of a process of seduction—or indexing successful seduction—in a more diffuse and dynamic relationship, whereas to Samburu they are better construed as problems within a relatively static relationship. Thirdly, studies linking sex and food do not tend to take the nutritional aspects of food seriously. While there may be reference to economic dimensions (e.g. Clark 1994) the fact that food is implicated in health, morbidity and mortality is not emphasized, particularly as they may relate to sex. Finally, the present analysis differs in its explicit focus on a male point of view. If a male bias continues to exist in some areas of anthropological analysis, cooking is not one of them. Mintz (2003) has noted that cooking has, in fact, been a largely neglected area of food studies, a fact that he attributes to gender bias in ignoring a largely female realm. As this has been increasingly

corrected it has tended to be done so by female anthropologists focusing their analysis on the female point of view. However, just as any domain in gender studies must be understood in the way it is constituted through the interactions of both males and females, one can hardly hope to understand cooking fully with reference only to female producers without accounting for the position of male recipients of food. That said, it is not my intention to ignore the female point of view, but to enrich it through reference to a masculine one.

Bulls and Wild Dogs

As discussed in the introduction to this paper, the thinning of younger elders—that is, those still in their reproductive prime, ranging from their 30s through perhaps their 50s—may be understood through reference to a bovine idiom comparing their reproductive labor to that of their livestock. Samburu typically castrate non-reproductive males of all livestock species principally because they believe that sexual activity will lead to lesser weight gains. Similar to the Samburu examples I have discussed, an anthropologist friend working with the closely related Mukogodo Maasai (living on the southern border of Samburu) noted his informants' jokes at the weight gain he experienced during fieldwork. Noting that he was there without his wife, his informants quipped "That always happens when we castrate cattle" (Herren, personal communication).

Within such discourses male sexual activity is construed as neither a right nor a pleasure, but as an obligation to provide their wives with sexual services for purposes of procreation. This is not to argue that Samburu men dislike sex. Though there are many reasons for polygyny, seeking a young, desirable new wife can be one, if generally a lesser, motivation. Further, both premarital and extramarital sex are the norm. Some men are seen as having irresponsibly high sexual appetites, disregarding prohibitions on having sex with their wives before infants are weaned. However, it is considered preferable that Samburu men do not like their wives too much, lest they fail in having to have the approach of a disinterested disciplinarian needed to be proper "owners" (*lopeny*) of the family. The relatively small number of Samburu marriages that occur between couples who already are romantically involved are generally viewed as failures because the husband's affection

towards his wife blinds him to making proper decisions concerning the well being of the family. One informant who exhibited what he construed as inordinate affection towards a chronically wayward wife maintained that she literally had bewitched him, insofar as she came from a family that was known to have the ability to prepare charms (*ntasim*) that "tie" a man, binding him helplessly to a woman in a way that, in a Euroamerican view, we would simply construe as "affection" or even "love". The upshot of this is that sex with one's wife or wives, though sometimes regarded as pleasurable, is in many senses construed firstly as an obligation undertaken in order to provide their wives with children, and an obligation that from the standpoint of nutritional well being this can be considered as problematically leading to thinness in men.

This does not, of course, mean that being a bull is necessarily bad. Indeed, being a bull (*laingoini*) is a rather laudatory term, referring not to men in general but to men who exhibit particular virility or other desirable masculine qualities, as seen in a range of contexts. For instance, a warrior who is strong and brave is regarded as a bull. A warrior who engages in many affairs prior to marriage (esp. with the wives of elders) may be viewed as a laingoni, with it here carrying both positive and negative connotations, a kind of rapscallion with great energy and great virility, but perhaps also carrying great sin. Being a bull can be both a blessing and a curse. If there are negative aspects to it—a propensity for death in battle, or thinness in elderhood—Samburu men would hardly choose to be construed as the alternative, like my anthropologist friend fattening due to his emasculation. Indeed, the implications of not being a bull may be seen on the other end of this continuum. Consider the words of Lekadaa, an elder of the Mekuri age set (initiated 1936), with several wives but very thin:

> As for my wives, they no longer love me as before. When they see me coming they see me just as a wild dog. The past was different [for me] because once you go to that stage when you are no longer able to have sex, then it becomes that you and your wives are no longer are strongly bound and they say to themselves 'I am not going to stop him from passing away' [by continuing to feed him].

Lekadaa's description is of a scenario in which he has come to be viewed as superfluous. He is one more mouth to feed, whose usefulness ended when his sexual ability ended. He is baggage, who may of may not be thrown a scrap as one would to a beast or ownerless dog lurking in the bush. In other cases, however, wives are portrayed as taking a more proactive approach to starving their aging husbands to death. In one instance, a wife is said to have changed the placement of her blind husband's food dish, so that he was unable to find it, killing him slowly while feigning to others that she had provided him with food that he simply chose not to eat. Lepariyo, an age mate of Lekadaa, echoes the extent to which a man's sexual demise can lead to his being denied food, illustrating it with a recent anecdote:

> You see, if a woman finds that you can no longer sleep with her the way you could when you were young, she puts you to the back of the line [and doesn't feed you]. Once she finds that there is no work (i.e. sex) you can do for her she puts you at the back of the line.
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> The other day those Lorokushu, who can't keep quiet about anything, said that this old man, Lesori, went to borrow some sugar from his neighbors. But when he brought it home he took it from one wife to another telling them that they should cooked him tea, but all of them told him that there was nothing [i.e. no milk] to cook it with. He tried to go to another one and was told I have nothing to make it with. They said "Don't you know the children finished everything? What do you think I could make it with?" So he just sat outside eating sugar, eating white sugar just as is.

Examples such as these, and the dynamics underlying them, are described by members of various age-gender segments. Though their explanations may differ somewhat, and the dynamics may differ, women as well note the desire of some younger wives to kill their older husbands by depriving them of food. As Maria Lekilit, a woman in her 50s explains:

> There are many women who make their husband go without food…Like a young child who is forced to be married to an aged husband. For instance, as I push my

> child now and give her to Lengiro [a man is his late 60s], even her father is younger. And does the child want that old man? She doesn't. Isn't she saying that she wants him to die? She wants that, so she says 'It is better that he dies, that he dies faster, so that he goes.' Then she can go look for a man who is young like herself.

It is not only women who can be construed as the villains in these stories, but a man's own sons. As sons become initiated into manhood (around the ages of 15-20) conflicts with their father become increasingly common. Concomitant with this, a woman with older children may be nearing the end of her reproductive life, less interested in having more children, and enjoying increased power and social status by having initiated sons. Legiso, a man in his 50s notes a common dynamic:

> A wife can behave that way (i.e. not feed the husband) when their children get older. There can be a problem when the children of a wife get old. There are many instances with women who, when their children get older, look down on the husband and they undermine him together. She sees no need even to give him food.

Legiso subtly implicates the sons in this dynamic, a point raised more forcefully by the Lekupano, a man in his 30s. While noting a general tendency for some women to starve their husbands, he emphasizes "It becomes worse when the sons get older and can join in an alliance against him." Lekupano's statement, while revealing, was also peculiarly ironic. His father, though seeming to persevere year after year, was the absolute thinness man in my sample, with a BMI of 13.5, and others in the community criticized Lekupano for not caring for his father properly.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me first emphasize two things I am not arguing. First, though I am writing predominantly from the masculine subjectivity and emphasizing problems men encounter, I do not aim to portray them as victims. If food is one area where women are relatively empowered vis a vis their husbands, there are other ways in which their own

predicament is problematic. Both Samburu men and women also emphasize that there are many good wives who do not cheat their husbands of their rightful share of food, and the words of one young wife noting possible drunkenness, neglectfulness or abuse in souring marital relations can ring true: "There are so many reasons to starve your husband, but you just feed him for the sake of God and your children." As in any human situation, there are husbands whose behavior is not exemplary just as there are less than exemplary wives. Second, while I have aimed to outline some key discourses and common dynamics tying food and sexuality in Samburu, they are not linked in all contexts and in any case the dynamic is complex, playing out in various, sometimes contradictory ways.

Let us then return to Lelelit, with whom this paper began, to consider this complexity. Lelelit remarked on the thinness of bulls, how as with their livestock, vigorous mating is what makes Samburu men thin. Lelelit no doubt considered himself a bull, physically strong and with a powerful, outgoing personality. Yet he was not thin—not overweight by any means, but around what is considered to be a healthy weight by international standards, and hence in Samburu better off than most. Consider, in contrast, his father, to whom Lekadaa's, as well as Lelelit's own further statements might well apply: "Some women, they no longer have some love for the husband. And so, it comes to pass that she stops cooking food for him." His father, aged and blind, poses as the perfect candidate to be suffer not "the thinness of bulls" but the sorry lot of a "wild dog" described by Lekadaa, past the point of sexual usefulness, and cast only scraps of food if given anything at all. Yet Lelelit's father was, for a Samburu, a man of considerable girth, healthy and with visible fatness. Informants close to him suggested that this might have been due to two factors that run somewhat counter to the dynamics I have emphasized. On one hand, his very helplessness could lead his wife to "simply count him as one of the children." That is, he was no longer seen as a potentially benevolent or authoritarian "owner" of the family, but someone whose weakness invited mercy, and whose blindness perhaps prevented him from monitoring if the share afforded him detracted from the share afforded to his children, something expected of Samburu fathers. Second, he was on very good terms with his grown sons. Consequently, rather than being in a situation where they might ally with their mother against him, it was deemed likely that they oversaw the situation to make sure he was cared for properly.

The dynamic, then, is complex, but one that differs significantly from case studies to date in Africa and elsewhere. The links between sex and food are powerful, both being among the most basic aspects of the human experience, and two of the few which, in most societies in Africa and around the globe, inexorably bring the genders together in contexts where sexual politics and gastropolitics are often mutually constituting. As the examples I have offered here highlight, there remains much to explore.

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