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Feasting

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Feasts are special meals (food out of the ordinary in kind or quantity) shared among an enlarged circle of people. They are occasions for many kinds of activities, not only eating and talking, but musical performances, formal speech, prayer and sacrifice, politicking and commerce. Feasts are ubiquitous throughout the world and human history: consider museums filled to brimming with the knives, jugs, cups and platters of past feasts. Archaeologists have dominated the study of feasting over the last thirty years, using it as a means to approach the most important questions of their discipline in new ways. In socio-cultural anthropology by contrast, the study of feasting as a discrete and clearly defined phenomenon does not exist. This means that insights into feasting are buried in the ethnographic record and tangled up with theorizations of more prominent themes like ritual, ceremonial exchange, and sacrifice. This essay is a dig for some of this buried treasure. It takes a semiotic approach to show that feasts have world-making effects because they both achieve concrete goals – mobilising resources, exciting passions, negotiating political positions – and realise deeply held values.

Introduction

Feasts are ‘total social phenomena’: complex happenings that are at once religious, mythological, economic, social, and aesthetic in nature (Mauss 2002 [1925]: 49, 101). This opening assertion immediately suggests similarities between feasts and rituals. Both are highly structured events that are densely meaningful and intensely memorable to participants. They involve a high degree of social coordination (bringing people together and organising their work) and the accumulation and expenditure of significant resources. They shape the arrangements in which we live and the values we live by. This makes them windows onto everything that is of prime interest to anthropologists; what better way to understand a people than to attend a feast or a ritual? Unlike rituals, however, about which anthropologists continue to publish reams and reams, never tiring of proposing new definitions and disputing ritual’s significance within wider human experience, ‘feasting’ does not exist as a defined area of study in socio-cultural anthropology.

Where feasts have received attention is in literatures about parts of the world where they are the exemplary form of ritualised sociality. This is the case with Chinese banquets and associated *guanxi* practices (e.g. Yang 1994; Kipnis 1997; Yang 1994) and Georgian *supra* – sumptuous meals presided over by a toast-master (e.g. Manning 2012; Mars and Altman 1987). It is worth noting that both are relatively similar to historical European feasts: luxury foods and alcoholic drinks are consumed at laid tables and gender distinctions and social hierarchies are marked. However, we need to begin by defining feasting in a

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way that encompasses greater diversity than these relatively kindred forms, whilst remaining specific enough to distinguish feasts from other important events.

Let's start with the obvious features that distinguish a feast from other events: feasts always involve the sharing and eating of food, even when it may be underemphasised compared to the other activities going on around it such as gifting, music-making, dancing, and oratory. It is useful to keep the specific – edible, drinkable – materiality of feasts in mind. Especially apt, therefore, is the archaeologist Brian Hayden's definition of the feast as 'any sharing of special food (in quality, preparation, or quantity) by two or more people for a special (not every day) event' (Hayden 2001). Many rituals contain a feasting element but at the centre of the feast is always food and drink.

Even a review essay must take some theoretical perspective and so I will start by making explicit three propositions that define my approach. First, as mentioned above, we need to pay attention to food and eating to make space for the feast within the wider frame of ritual. Second, feasting is universal: it is found worldwide and throughout human history. It is both 'primitive' in the sense that it is there at the origin of human culture, and booming today when restaurant expenditure in the USA and the UK is soaring at the expense of meals cooked and eaten at home, and programmes like 'Come Dine with Me' highlight the risk and excitement of food-mediated interactions with strangers, and 'Bake Off' unites the British nation.

Of course, whether you think feasting is universal or not depends on how you define it in the first place. I like the archaeologist's roomy definition because it allows us to explore what is shared even with primates and hominid ancestors; what is specifically human; and then the myriad cultural variations within this. Writing in this vein I distance myself from the idea that feasting only exists in certain kinds of societies and historical epochs. For example, some anthropologists define feasting in a more limited way and argue that it arrived in human history with forms of social stratification (see Hayden 2014: 44), flourished in Classical and Medieval Europe and was then crushed by a subsequent history of rationalization and secularization so that today 'feasting is no longer part of our experience' (Valeri and Hoskins 2002: 6). In order to counter this view, in the first section of this essay I draw briefly on biological anthropology and archaeology to explore the evolution of feasting behaviour and throughout I freely compare examples from various historical epochs and parts of the world.

The third and final proposition is that feasting is better understood as 'foundational' rather than 'functional', and this requires a little explanation. 'Functionalist' perspectives tend to see feasts as responsive to pre-existing conditions in the world which feasts uphold or reproduce. So hierarchy may be supported by status competition between feast sponsors, or stratified seating arrangements among guests; communitarianism by the sharing of food from a common pot; or ecological balance by the resource-control that cyclical feasts enable. In contrast, the foundational perspective suggests that feasts make rather than reflect qualities of the world. The organization of labour, resources, time, relationships, and pleasure in

feasting generates particular kinds of social arrangements, values, economies, and temporalities. This reorientation from function to foundation is associated with symbolic anthropology, which in general terms assumes that every time we speak or act as humans, our specific and concrete actions evoke the wider categories that organise social life and therefore have the capacity to recreate and transform them (see e.g. Stasch 2011). In the second section of this essay I will show that many anthropological accounts can be read as either making functional or foundational claims. Finally, I show how the foundational lens accounts for various aspects of feasts: the moral and political contestation they provide an arena for; the work and resources they marshal; and the invisible powers they engage. Because feasts are important at multiple levels of experience simultaneously (biological, economic, political, cosmological, social), they tend to realise fundamental characteristics of the world.

Preparations for a feast in rural Simbu Province, Papua New Guinea in October 2015[1]

The earth oven is opened and the food is displayed prior to speech-making and careful distribution

The cultural nature of feasting

Scholars of human evolution suggest that feasting is shared by primates, hominid ancestors, and humans. Just as a Cambridge College feast has its alpha male (usually 'the Master' even if he is a she) who sits surrounded by an elite group and eats and rises first, so too during chimpanzee feasts, such as that observed by Jane Goodall in the late 1960s, rank and status are acknowledged and displayed, with meat passing from higher to lower ranking males (Jones 2008: 34). Contemporary primates nonetheless lack fire with which to cook food and this is a limitation they share with our more distant hominid ancestors who also feasted on raw meat. At the site of Boxgrove, near Chichester in southern England, archaeologists uncovered evidence of a feast on 400 kg of raw wild horse meat, held half a million years ago by Homo heidelbergiensis, a hominid predecessor of Neanderthals, who were probably the first hominids to control fire and cook, at least as long as 80,000 years ago (Jones 2008: 78). Jones suggests that it was when our ancestors began to share food face-to-face around glowing hearths that feed became food and the threat and danger of fire, direct eye contact, and the exposure of teeth, was turned into a sociable event (Jones 2008: 1–2).

This takes us to the influential sociologist and philosopher Georg Simmel, who suggested in a 1910 essay on the 'Sociology of the meal' that it was in meal-taking that humans rose above their identities as selfish organisms to become social persons. Simmel noted that, strictly speaking, food could not be shared

 ISSN 2398-516X

because the same food cannot be put into two mouths. However, if eating is an inherently exclusionary and selfish activity, humans, he said, had transformed it into a habit of gathering together to take common meals (Simmel 1997 [1910]: 130). Simmel's juxtaposition of selfish organism and social person is an early example of how the meal has served as a paradigm for human culture. This argument was elaborated in the writings of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Mary Douglas in the 1960s and 1970s. Lévi-Strauss showed that cookery was a language-like system (Lévi-Strauss 1964, 1968), Douglas's focus was on the structure of meals. She stressed that unlike grazing cows who ruminate constantly, human's meals are routinised and ritualised, marking the passing of time and drawing spatial boundaries and social distinctions. In short, 'food is not feed' (Douglas 1977: 7). To take Douglas's best known example, the American family has a daily cycle of three meals with allotted times and formats for each, as well as an annual cycle marking festive occasions and a third, longer-term cycle, marking the life-cycle transitions of family members. Additionally, there are seating arrangements, dress codes, and tacit rules about the order in which foods should be consumed (Douglas 1972). Imitating Douglas's style of analysis, archaeologist Martin Jones observes that feasts in his Cambridge College involve especially elaborate boundary mechanisms. He counts thirty-three items of food-sharing technology arrayed for his use at a feast; notes that his body is encased in seven items of extra attire, which he wears only on feasting occasions; observes the panels which separate areas of food preparation, service, and consumption; and comments on the seating arrangements, which carefully mark his status relative to others, many of whom are strangers (Jones 2008: 32).

In summary, anthropologists have long argued that the sociable sharing of carefully cooked food, in delimited times, spaces, and social circles, is at the heart of what makes us human.

Function versus foundation

The hardiest assumption about feasts is that they are functional in some social or biological way: they create social solidarity, enhance the feast-giver's status, or help humans adapt to their environment. This was an important argument for anthropologists to make in the colonial era when other people's feasts were often perceived to be irrational and wasteful and were sometimes even prohibited. Various functional explanations for feasting behaviour flourished in the decades after World War Two when anthropologists flocked to the densely populated highlands of Papua New Guinea (PNG) and documented the devotion of massive resources to periodic pig feasts. Reflecting the Australian colonial administration's disapproval (and anticipating the attitude of her readers), anthropologist Marie Reay introduced the Kuma 'Pig Ceremonial' thus:

> *People hoard and fatten their pigs for years in preparation for the Pig Ceremonial … A clan kills practically all its pigs at once, and people who are starved of pork and fat then stuff themselves with it to the exclusion of other foods … Few opportunities for eating pork remain for two or three years after this orgy* (Reay 1959: 21).

 ISSN 2398-516X

Reay's book is actually about why these practices make sense in terms of the religious beliefs of Kuma people and their social priorities: the pig kills created fertility, prosperity, and renown. In a materialist rather than a culturalist tradition, Rappaport (1967) argued that pig-raising strategies were a rational way of converting vegetable crops into high-quality animal protein. He attempted to prove, based on both qualitative and quantitative types of analysis, the adaptiveness of social constraints surrounding the consumption of pigs in terms of population control and the satisfaction of human nutritional needs. Yet others emphasised the political importance of periodic pig kills, which brought together autonomous groups from a large region and were the context for alliance-building; the show of clan solidarity and strength; and the stage for individual and group status competition (Meggitt 1974; Strathern 1971). All these approaches share assumptions of functionalism, i.e. that things generally fit together coherently and 'work'. They can all also be read as foundational since they stop short of reducing feasting to a single, dominant function.

Perhaps the best illustration of engagement with functionalist arguments alongside the articulation of a more foundational perspective is Michael Young's ethnography, *Fighting with food* (1971). Young's book about Goodenough island life focuses on the way that an abstract system of values and an esoteric domain of magical knowledge are motivated by, and find their most compelling expression in, feasts. Goodenough Island is one of many in the Massim archipelago, which lies off the south-eastern tip of New Guinea. A Goodenough festival's climax was a large distribution of pigs and vegetable food to visitors assembled in the sponsor's village. Visitors gathered around platforms and stands on which food was displayed, listened to the sponsor and other chiefs' speeches and then watched as the display was disassembled and guests received food. With his gifts of food-wealth the chief repaid debts he had accrued and marked new debtors, among them enemies who received the food along with a message about the offences they had committed against him – adultery, abuse of hospitality, theft, insult, and meanness. The distribution was therefore a great drama in which 'visitors delight in unexpected scandals or delicts suddenly brought to light' (Young 1971: 244). Aside from its entertainment value, the festival was, Young said, an 'instrument of social control', which worked by public shaming and the obligation to repay. He suggests that it worked rather well, providing a mode of redress which did not resort to physical aggression or warfare (Young 1971: 264). He suggested that one of the reasons Goodenough islanders in the 1960s took competitive food exchange to such an extreme was the colonial suppression of warfare (Young 1971: 233, 250). Feasts worked as a kind of system of justice and conflict resolution that was better than anything colonial officials could think to impose. Young therefore suggested that colonization could lead to feasts' flourishing rather than to their inevitable extinction. This is a trend other scholars have also noticed in other parts of the world (e.g. Kirch and Sahlins 1992; Masco 1995) where there have been colonial booms in feasting and exchange activity. On the basis of his historical analysis of Kwakw*aka*'wakw Potlatch, Masco suggests that feasting tends to flourish during phases of great historical upheaval because it allows people to work through the new conditions they find themselves in and thereby to seize control of their lives (Masco 1995: 57). Masco and

Young therefore both show that feasts are foundational to both people's enduring identity and their capacity to direct historical change.

While Young is keen to demonstrate the rationality of feasts and festivals in terms of their equivalence to Western legal and political systems, much of his book is about elucidating the value system in which food serves as political currency. Festivals brought political credit and fame to sponsors who proved that they could incarnate the paramount moral values of industriousness, self-discipline, and magnanimity (Young 1971: 252). As the crucial events in Goodenough people's lives, much of their everyday behaviour is oriented to cultivating the right kind of knowledge and moral disposition to enable them to succeed at feasting. For example, Young describes how men test their mettle and the power of their anti-hunger magic by keeping their best yams to rot, uneaten, inside their houses. This is one way in which they harden themselves into virtuous food abstainers who never admit hunger or allow themselves to be seen eating in public (Young 1971: 159). It is in the context of these values, for which feasting is the ultimate stage, that the giving of food between adult men is an aggressive act which shames the recipient. This is why at the Goodenough festival's climax, upon the distribution of great plenty, nobody eats.

Eating and not eating

On Goodenough island and in Highlands of Papua New Guinea, the drama of the feast is in the gathering together, display, and distribution of food and not in the eating itself. Portions of food may be deliberately too large to eat or they may be distributed raw or undercooked (Rubel & Rosman 1978: 305). In the Goodenough extreme, eating is explicitly taboo. Perhaps a more common pattern is that hosts, as sponsors and owners of the feast, serve guests but do not eat themselves. What happens then is that food serves to oppose two groups of people (givers and receivers). This is the case in most Amazonian feasts where hosts are defined by their role as givers of food or drink, and guests as eaters and drinkers. I will give two examples, one in which hosts are forceful and the other in which they are humble.

The *Tamara* festival of the 'Wari of Western Amazonia begins when guests from other subgroups arrive singing at a foreign village only to be humiliated by hosts, who stuff food into the incomers' mouths pitilessly while insulting the quality of their singing. The guests passively accept this treatment and continue to complain of hunger despite the large quantities they are fed (Vilaça 2010: 64–5). What is going on here is that guests are being treated as the animal prey of hosts, and the mutual stranger status of the two groups is being affirmed.

Among the Enawenê-nawê with whom I work and who live south-eastwards of the 'Wari in Brazilian Amazonia, in each season of the year there is a different opposition between offering and consuming parties within a single village: women serve men, men serve women, or the men of one clan serve the men of the remaining eight clans. As in the 'Wari case, the emphasis is precisely on the reversibility of the

oppositions enacted through relations of production and consumption – the point is to take turns and to create a dynamic of reciprocity. Unlike in the 'Wari *Tamara* festival, Enawenê-nawê hosts are humble because they are providing nourishment to others who incarnate spirits whom the hosts wish to sate and gratify. Both these cases contrast with others in which the identity of eaters and servers is fixed by hierarchy or gender and is usually non-reversible. A very clear example of this is the Georgian feast (*supra*) in the form it took in late Soviet times, when men sat at tables to eat from ever-full platters and to drink wine from bottomless cups, while women garnered resources, cooked, and stood ready assiduously serving and pouring (Manning 2012: 153–5). There was no *supra* in which women sat while men served them.

The ethnographic and historical record gives us every permutation of shared and restricted commensality. I will end with two extremes, both taken from European contexts, past and present. In a transfiguration of former medieval feasts at which noble men shared the King's table, at Versailles the King began to take his meals seated alone, surrounded by standing courtiers – making this feast a public event with no commensality (Freedman 2015: 103). In contrast, the paradigmatic act of sociability at European formal dining occasions is the act of standing to toast the embodiment of a shared ideal ('The Bride and Groom'; 'The Queen') around a table, touching glasses (or merely lifting them) and making eye contact (or gazing into space) before everyone simultaneously drinks. Toasting, which links two uses of the mouth (communication and consumption) is a concrete expression of accord in mind and communion in body. It can be convivial and heartfelt, or formal and even strained, but its affordances are the same. Waiters and waitresses don't join the toast, so that one-way offering and sharing coexist.

Risky, anti-social feasts

If feasts are fundamental to the creation of the world in which people live then why are they so prone to fail? They can descend into drunken blowouts, jeopardising all the good outcomes that they promised, or alternatively they can fall flat, remaining so formal and constrained that they never generate the 'effervescence' which sociologist Emile Durkheim (1995 [1912]) saw as their ineffable brew. Feasts may also meet with disaster and have overtly dysfunctional outcomes: sponsors can produce too little food or drink for their guests, hostilities can break out, and there is the ever-present threat of poisoning – in London's Mayfair or in Brazilian Amazonia. I suggest that the very fact that feasts are so prone to fail is a sure sign that they are efficacious and consequential.

Fights at festive family meals are a staple of novels and dramas. A great example is the Danish film, *Festen* (directed by Thomas Vinterberg), which is an exploration of the perversion of family values through the souring of the feast. It follows the unravelling of an upper-class dinner party on the occasion of the senior male of the family's sixtieth birthday. Sinister family secrets are revealed as tensions build painstakingly over many courses and increasingly malevolent toasts. There is probably always a degree of brinkmanship entailed in orchestrating feasts. One of the reasons for this is that hosts tend to work to the boundaries of

what they can pull off. Freedman (2015: 103–4) provides various medieval examples of hungry stampedes trampling the food, of melting confectionery sculptures, and of other dramatic failures born of audacious ambition.

The spectre of poison is the ultimate spoiler. In medieval times, specialist tasters ritually tested food before it reached the mouths of nobles and royals. The Amazonian Kuikuro also ritually test drinks for poison but their motives are more communitarian. Like many Amerindians, the Kuikuro make their special drinks from the juice of bitter manioc, which is high in cyanide and can be lethal to humans when raw or undercooked. The cyanide is gradually transformed into sugar through prolonged boiling. The Kuikuro dramatise the danger of poisoning and its overcoming by designating a man as a formal taster. He very publicly assumes responsibility for protecting the community and its guests. He sips the drink after it has been boiled for some time and always pronounces it to be, as yet, unsafe to drink. Only once it has been re-boiled and tested a third time does the official taster pronounce it safe to drink (Dole 1978: 232). The drink is then passed among all the guests, a sharing which, after such an ominous start, emphasises their peaceful coexistence.

Undoubtedly the most spectacular and laborious of the feasts held by the Amazonian Enawenê-nawê is a reunion between two halves of the population, on the one side the hosts and all the women of the village, and on the other, the fishermen who return from an approximately sixty-day fishing expedition. The hosts do everything they can to find out when the fishermen are likely to return so that women can correctly time the production of about 4,000 litres of a manioc and corn porridge called *ketera*. The fishermen have been far from their gardens living off dry bread and flour, and they are said to eagerly desire this drink. Indeed, the homely drink is a necessity for successful reunion, since it reminds the men of the human mores they have side-lined at the fishing dams. Inconveniently, the drink has to be made fresh and the process takes a minimum of eight hours from start to finish. This means that if women hear a distant hum of engine noise which indicates the possibility of the fishermen's imminent arrival, they will wake in the night to start frantically grating manioc. This is a work of anticipation. The whole event is defined by uncertainty about the timing of the fishermen's arrival which is coupled with their potentially dangerous disposition. The huge quantity of *ketera* and its laborious preparation makes a show of indomitable preparedness in the face of all this risk and anxiety. If this feast was not prone to go disastrously wrong then the reunification of the community would not be such a climactic achievement.

Morality and politics under negotiation

I have now established that feasting neither necessarily upholds or upends social and political orders; rather, it is part of their making, their maintenance, and sometimes also their undoing. In fact, feasting seems to be a key infrastructure for specifically *political* action. A feast can serve any end – reformist, conservative, or revolutionary – but what is always true is that feasts are a flash point for political and

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moral contestation. On the side of revolution, Mao Zedong forbade large banquets and ancestor commemorations when he became chairman of the new people's republic in 1949 (Goody 1982: 173) and during the Cultural Revolution he closed both restaurants and brothels in a renewed attack on indulgence (Goody 1982: 149). At the other pole is conservative luxury. Sumptuary laws like those issued by Edward II in 1283 limited the number of courses that were permitted at any feast and controlled the populace's access to food and drink. These laws were intended to preserve the existing hierarchy by restraining feasting by persons of inferior rank, who were perceived as threatening upstarts, imitating the great men of the kingdom (Goody 1982: 141). In ancient Greece we find something intermediate; a constitutive tension between luxury and puritanism within the elite. In Homer's epic poems, elite heroes feast on the simple fare of bread and platters of meat. This made them equals, joined by the fellowship of the table where eating and drinking, talking, fighting, and politics were inseparable so that access to the table equalled access to power (O'Connor 2015: 92–6). Homer's depiction of frugal, egalitarian commensality in the male public sphere was probably an idealised one but it inspired later generations for whom feasts, banquets, and all-male drinking parties remained key political fora and had to be continually reformed against the subversive threats of excess and luxury (O'Connor 2015: 109–11).

Politics and feasting are perhaps nowhere more self-consciously entwined than in Georgia, where debates about the proper form of the traditional feast, the *supra*, are always about authoritarian governance, and where attempts to reform the *supra* aim at nothing less than transforming statehood (Manning 2012: 148–76). In the 1980s, *supra* were feats of endurance, lasting up to eight hours during which toasts were interspersed with singing, dancing, and recitations (Mars and Altman 1987: 272–3). There could be twenty or more rounds of toasts in an evening (each requiring a man to drain his glass). Because everyone present was mentioned in at least one toast and the toasts passed through the clinking of glasses from one speaker to the next, the assembled company became linked across distant tables (Mars and Altman 1987). Stalin is famed to have ruled from his lavish dinner table (Freedman 2015: 106) and was a Georgian by birth, and Manning suggests that every Georgian toast-master is under Stalin's shadow as the 'dictator' of the feast table. In the post-socialist era, people disagree vociferously about whether the *supra* is a noble, indigenous form of civil society or a vehicle for authoritarianism masquerading under the guise of a harmless tradition (Manning 2012: 172). Critics comment that the toast-master is elected but that his election is a farce since there is only one candidate and he always wins unanimously (Manning 2012: 167–8). Manning mentions a young professional woman telling him in 2001 that rather than having a *supra* for her birthday party she had celebrated with a 'democracy'. This she described as a feast at which there was no toast-master to tell people what to do (Manning 2012: 169).

It is easy to see all this as mere metaphor, but both Manning and Altman and Mars, whose work I have drawn on here, make the stronger argument that politics happens in and through the *supra*. Thus the 'cultured *supra*' (not a drunken orgy) was actively propagated throughout the Soviet Union as good

 ISSN 2398-516X

socialist culture and it was under late socialism, with its relative bounty, that *supra* flourished (Manning 2012: 175–6). Later, the proliferated *supra* had unintended consequences for Soviet rule. The *supra* in 1980s Georgia allowed people to be good socialists in a way that worked for them. Through the linkages established through toasting, people obtained scarce jobs, permits and licenses, and places at university for their children (Mars and Altman 1987: 278) which were hard to get through the strictures of state bureaucracy.

Feasts can always uphold or threaten the naturalised pecking order among classes and kinds of people, and to end this section I want to reflect briefly upon the banning of native peoples' feasts by colonial governments. We have seen that feasting and status competition are a major part of European cultural heritage, so why was feasting among the newly discovered peoples of the colonies often met with surprise, disdain, and even criminalization? Marcel Mauss answered this question in one way in his 1925 essay *The gift*. He said that Native peoples were being judged according to the standards of Enlightenment rationalism and its theories about the kind of economy that was 'natural'. For rational utilitarian thinkers this was an economy which provided for men's needs (Mauss 2002 [1925]: 92). Colonists had difficulty accepting that economies that were supposed to be 'primitive' were elaborate prestige contests rather than being organised around a struggle for survival (Mauss 2002 [1925]: 96).

A more cynical or real-political explanation emerges from the outlawing of potlatch in the American northwest between 1884 and 1951, which is a famous example of the resolute colonial repression of feasting. Potlatch was an exchange practice led by ranked nobility who distributed property and food to validate their status which was based on their connection to the supernatural powers that controlled the fecundity of the natural world (Masco 1995: 44–7). Before the mid-nineteenth century animal furs, canoes, mats, meat, and slaves were the currency of potlatch and gradually, over the next hundred years, trade goods and then money replaced them (Masco 1995: 51–53, 69–72). In 1889 the founding father of American anthropology, Franz Boas, famously criticised the ban on potlatch by arguing that the potlatch was very similar to the economies of 'civilized communities', involving finance and debt calculations (High 2012: 368). As Masco (1995: 65) shows, Boas' argument was unlikely to be persuasive since it was precisely because the administration recognised that potlatch incorporated capitalist practices to support a ritual economy which was outside of European control that they wanted to stamp it out. They correctly singled out the potlatch as the Kwakw*aka*'wakw people's dominant world-making practice. Attacking it was their way of destroying the native cosmology and turning hunters into 'productive' farmers and Christian citizens (Masco 1995).

The potlatch has been approached and re-approached from every angle in every era of anthropological scholarship, which shows that feasts work at multiple levels, are dense with meaning, and are constantly shape-shifting as they transform historically. However, it is surprising that while the potlatch is always called a 'feast', very little of this scholarship (with the exception of Walens' *Feasting with cannibals,* 1981)

is about the food or the eating. Perhaps this is because it seemed obvious to anthropologists that 'traditional' peoples should hunt and feast to generate further plenty and exceptional that they should have developed modern systems based on debts and interest.

Production before the feast

We now need to turn back the clock and go behind the scenes of feasts. Instead of analysing feasting from the moment the table is laid or the food displayed, we need to explore the organization of time, labour, and resources that go into feasts. The causal nature of feasts' world-making capacity comes to light in these processes. Rupert Stasch's (2003) ethnography of the West Papuan Korowai's sago-grub feasts is a great illustration of the way that bringing about a feast generates people's core values and reshapes their social and physical environment. It is also a good example of an analysis which concentrates on feast preparation, as opposed to consumption. Stasch's emphasis is proportional to the Korowai's own: these feasts marshal resources amassed over a decade and involve two months of intensive work but are all over in 24 hours.

Korowai usually live in single or paired small households, separated from their nearest neighbours by stretches of forest. This small circle continuously processes sago palm starch from the stands within their clan's territory to meet their basic food needs, at a rate of about one palm every ten days (Stasch 2003: 360). About once a decade, however, different families associated with a clan build houses in a huddle and work together to prepare a feast. They fell up to 1,000 mature sago palms and break open the trunks so that, over a month or so, fat, juicy grubs develop in the exposed pith (Stasch 2003). As the grubs develop, the feast sponsors build a longhouse in which to host invitees. So that the guests are well-fed, the grubs need to be harvested when they are fat but because of the nature of grub development, this is just before they turn into beetles and fly away (Stasch 2003: 372). Grub maturation is inherently uncertain and difficult to time, depending on a range of unpredictable conditions. It is readily scuppered, for example, by the flooding of sago groves (which are low-lying and prone to flood). All of this means that the Korowai have apparently got themselves into a tricky situation because good relations with allies depend on a plentiful and timely crop of grubs, which can never be assured (Stasch 2003: 369). Stasch's argument in this article shows that perverse as this all seems, grubs are well-suited to the ambivalent quality of Korowai social relationships. The riskiness of a feast based on such a tricky food-stuff ensures the continuing unstable nature of Korowai inter-local alliances and the brinkmanship characteristic of all Korowai socialising.

Stasch's concentration on the symbolic weightiness of the work that leads up to the feast, which thrusts the Korowai into a mode of production and sociality that is profoundly contrary to their everyday lives, leads me to a second way in which feast preparations are constitutive of social life. The intensified work that is involved in preparing for a feast creates time apart from workaday life long before the guests arrive. Based on Enawenê-nawê ethnography I have argued that intensified production does not so much lead up to a

feast, but in a sense *is* the feast (Nahum-Claudel forthcoming). This is very tangible in the Enawenê-nawê context, where inebriating drinks are shunned, feast foods are just ordinary foods, and people always eat them in moderation. Unlike elsewhere in Amazonia, there is no Bacchic catharsis through coerced gorging on beer, copious vomiting, or paralysing intoxication (e.g. Stolze-Lima 2005: 311; Sztutman 2008: 230; Vilaça 1992: 189; Viveiros de Castro 1986: 354). Rather than consumption, energised collective work itself provides life's thrills and pleasures. Thus the annual ceremonial calendar involves many ritualised work events which seem to be about celebrating productive activity itself, by synchronising, staging, choreographing, and musicalising 'mundane' forms of subsistence agricultural and cooking work. One of these involves all the women of the village waking to pound dried corn seed and manioc fibre in hardwood standing mortars in the dead of night. They pound in an accelerated, syncopated rhythm and, because so many of them do so all around the circular village, the ground shakes.

If feasting is the pleasurable tonic that makes workaday life bearable and marks barren expanses of time with memorable events, it is also the case that production before the feast generates the energetic ebbs and flows that are so important to social life, cognition and the vitality of peoples' bodies. In the words of Olivia Harris, who came to similar conclusions about agricultural work parties in the Bolivian Andes, work to produce food can itself be a 'celebration of human energy, creativity and capacity to make and expand relationships' (Harris 2007: 143).

Invisible guests with power over life and death

From the food-laden alters at Mexican Day of the Dead celebrations to the ambrosia poured for the gods in ancient Greece, at feasts all over the world food and drink is shared with gods, spirits, and ancestors; prayers are spoken, food is consecrated, and libations are spilled. Eating and drinking become the medium for a connection between two dimensions of the world: phenomenal and invisible, living and dead. Hubert and Mauss's book (1964 [1898]) has been the starting point for thinking about sacrifice in anthropology along with Detienne and Vernant's (1979) landmark analyses of Classical sacrificial practices. In broad terms they demonstrate that feasts are means to influence the forces that people understand to have ultimate control over the world of the living. There can be no clearer statement that feasts are foundational than many peoples' certainty that on them rests the health of the population, the fertility of the earth, and the migrations of fish and game.

How is it that people and invisible guests can eat the same food? A common pattern is exemplified by the Kuma of Highland Papua New Guinea, where the immaterial part of the pig (the 'shadow pork') is devoured by ancestral ghosts while the surviving relatives feast on its flesh and fat (Reay 1959: 142). This assures that everyone's appetite for pork is satisfied so that ghosts refrain from harming their surviving relatives. The Cree of Manitoba, Canada describe much more complex and various channels of communion with different kinds of invisible agents (spirits, the souls of game animals, and living game animals) at play

during their 'eat-all' feasts (Brightman 1993: 224–35). Here tensions exist between blockage and communion, exploitation and reciprocity. Brightman describes a 1977 feast at Watt lake in which four boiled beavers (and all the stock), macaroni cheese, bannocks and doughnuts were eaten to the point of nausea and beyond. At the same time that Brightman writes about the feast in terms of the sacrificial gift which anticipates a future return of plentiful game, he shows that the feast is a coercive act rather than a reverent one. By gorging on meat – eating or burning every last scrap within a space that is blocked off from animal spirits – humans hide their exploitation of animals while they engage in a 'collective and aggressive act of magical control' over them (Brightman 1993: 235). The channel of influence is not only both open and closed, it is also two-way since as well as feeding spirits, people incorporate the essence of the game they eat to endow themselves with hunting prowess.

There is an unusual degree of elaboration of human-spirit commensality among the Enawenê-nawê, where food is considered to be owned by, and therefore always owed to, predatory spirits (see Nahum-Claudel 2012, forthcoming). The Enawenê-nawê live with this causal connection between food production, consumption, and mortality by sharing with the spirits every day. Mundane commensality is therefore feast-like because it involves the public display, distribution, and consumption of food and drink in the village's public central arena. This implies that almost all fishing, agriculture, and cuisine is devoted to large-scale catering, minimising the amount of food that is consumed privately and selfishly inside the house – the kind of eating that incites the spirits' aggression and leads to soul loss. What all these examples show is how metaphysical conceptions of socio-political relations, not only between living people but between beings in general, are worked out through accumulation, expenditure, commensality, and feeding.

Conclusion

Feasts mobilise people's values, their morality, and understanding of the world of which they are a part. They have particularly powerful world-making effects because they are both irreducibly concrete – satisfying hunger, exciting pleasures, coordinating the political-economy, and embedding themselves in the organization of time and memory – and expansively meaningful, simultaneously expressing and generating deeply held values. It is because feasts have this force that they can fail in so many ways: from the mundane to the disastrous. And it is because feasts work at so many levels that they have been so open to competing understandings about their function. Feasts do *do* a lot of things and it is a matter of perspective whether we choose to approach them in terms of their effects on other domains of life, conceived as separate and outside of them, or as internally linked, in causal and conceptual ways, to the whole of life. Within this broad argument, I have shown that the 'total' feast takes many forms and have surveyed a range of feasts to open up questions and suggest the following important lines of contrast.

The sharing of food is not a simple matter of a feast's definition (as it is for Simmel's meal) but rather a matter of cultural value: people may share communally or feed one another to generate oppositions which

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may be fixed or reversible. Feasts can uphold the order of things – maintain solidarity or affirm status hierarchies – but they are rarely free of political and moral contention. The questions, Who feasts? On what? And to what end? are pressing ones for political authorities and their opponents alike. Feasts can usefully focus broader debate or be flash-points for conflict. These high stakes make feasts risky undertakings.

A feast's consummation is often rather transitory in contrast to the elaborate labours that lead up to it. Moving from the feast as event to process highlights the importance, which has long been recognised in anthropology, of exploring the constraints and possibilities offered by a feast's productive base, be it sago grubs or luxury food and wine. How are resources amassed? With what technology and organization of time and division of labour? These factors should not be understood as external determinants but rather as the social and physical matter that is consciously moulded by people as historical agents. Again, it is because feasts mobilise passions, values, resources, and people all at once and with intensity, that they are great contexts for experimentation and reform. Through them people work out ways to accommodate the forces that constrain them while realising their wider ideals. Finally, feasting invariably transcends the social, and eating and drinking appear to be particularly powerful mediums through which to attempt to exert control over invisible agencies that encompass human life – be it the state, the feudal order, the ecology, or the spirits and ancestors who determine life and death.

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[1] The feast was sponsored by the author (pictured). Women prepare bananas and sweet potatoes for the earth oven while men butcher the pig and prepare a blood cake.

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