

CHAPTER 13

FEASTING AND FASTING

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1 INTRODUCTION

Food and drink have an especially prominent place in ritual and religion because they are ‘embodied material culture’ (see Dietler 2001, 2005). That is, they are material objects produced specifically to be destroyed by a form of consumption that involves ingestion into the human body. This fact lends them a heightened symbolic and affective resonance in the social construction of the self (Falk 1994). Moreover, given that eating and drinking are social acts that must be repeated virtually every day for biological survival, they occupy a salient place among the various routinized practices that, as Bourdieu (1990) explained, serve to inculcate habitus—that is, the set of embodied dispositions that structure action in the world and that unconsciously instantiate social roles and cultural categories and perceptions of identity and difference. Furthermore, because sustaining this process of consumption requires continual replenishing production through both agricultural and culinary labour, this domain of material culture is one where the intimate linkages between the domestic and political economy are especially evident (Goody 1982; Sahlins 1972). In addition, alcohol, as a special form of food with psychoactive effects, has a particularly salient role in ritual because of its transformative properties (Dietler 1990, 2006a; Heath 1987, 2000).

Feasting and fasting are two alternative ways to mobilize the symbolic power of food and drink, through either ritualized commensal consumption or refusal of consumption. Although ethnographic and historical research has shown that both practices are common in societies around the world and throughout history, the archaeological visibility of fasting is far more limited than that of feasting. This undoubtedly explains why the surge of recent interest by archaeologists in feasting (e.g. Benz and Gramsch 2006; Bray 2003a; Dietler 1990, 1996, 2001, 2006b; Dietler and Hayden 2001; Hayden 1990, 1996, 2001; Mills 2004; Wright 2004) has not been accompanied by a similar pursuit of fasting. This article examines the symbolic logic and material basis of both practices through a theoretical discussion based upon comparative ethnographic and historical data.

2 FEASTING

Feasting may be defined as a form of ritual activity centred on the communal consumption of food and drink. Rituals of this kind have played many important social, economic, and political roles in the lives of peoples around the world. As with other types of ritual, feasts provide an arena for both the highly condensed symbolic representation and the active manipulation of social relations, and they have an inherent political dimension (see Dietler 1996, 2001, 2006b; Hayden 1996, 2001).

Some scholars (e.g. Hayden 2001; Wills and Crown 2004) suggest that feasts need not be rituals, but this stems from an eccentric understanding of the nature of ritual. Identifying feasts as rituals does not mean that they are necessarily highly elaborate ceremonies. Nor need rituals necessarily be 'sacred' in character (see Moore and Myerhoff 1985). 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'. In fact, feast is the term that is used precisely to designate those food-consumption events that are in some way symbolically differentiated from daily meals. The ritual symbolism of feasting is constituted through a complex semiotic relationship to daily consumption patterns, and both form part of a common semiotic field (see Douglas 1984; Elias 1978). In order to understand the symbolic logic of feasts and the social roles they play, it is clearly necessary to examine feasts and daily meals together and to explore the various ways in which both symbolic differentiation and commonality are invoked in different contexts within the overall system of foodways (see below).

Perhaps the most famous examples of feasting are the Potlatch of Native Americans of the Northwest coast and the competitive feasts of New Guinea bigmen (Codere 1950; Feil 1984; Lemonnier 1990; Perodie 2001; Powdermaker 1932; Suttles 1991). These became well known in the anthropological literature because of the overtly agonistic escalating nature of the feasts, where lavish hospitality was used to crush guests under an obligation to respond with ever more generous hospitality in events that could take over a decade to prepare. Although such escalating feasts are known from other contexts as well (e.g. Rehfisch 1987), these are, in fact, not representative of feasting in general. Usually there are culturally specific behavioural sanctions and moral philosophies of legitimate power that restrict the escalation of such commensal practices and assure that cases of this extreme type are fairly unusual. But, as shown later, some degree of social competition is involved in all feasting. That is, those who do not keep up in their fulfilment of expected hospitality fall behind. Such practices always affect the *relative* status and influence of participants and the quality of relationships. In this sense, feasting is always competitive in its effects, even though the political implications may be subtle, limited, and thoroughly euphemized.

Ethnographic and historical studies have documented the prevalence, importance, and diversity of feasting in most regions of the world. Cases from Africa (e.g. Anigbo 1996; Dietler 2001; Goody 1982; Halperin and Olmstead 1976; Rehfisch 1987; Richards 1939; Saul 1983), the Pacific (Feil 1984; Hogbin 1970; Kirch 2001; Lemonnier 1990; Powdermaker 1932; Volkman 1985; Wiessner 2001), Latin America (Bartlett 1980; Cancian 1965; Kennedy 1978), and East and South-east Asia (Adams 2004; Clarke 2001; Friedman 1984; Hayden 2003) are particularly abundant in this literature, but other regions are also well represented. However, with a few

notable exceptions (e.g. Bell 1997: 120–8; Friedman 1979, 1984; Lemonnier 1990), treatment of feasting was often somewhat anecdotal, and explicit systematic attempts to develop a detailed cross-cultural theoretical framework for understanding feasting as a distinctive ritual practice did not appear until the theme was taken up by archaeologists in the 1990s (Dietler 1990, 1996, 2001; Gero 1992; Hayden 1990, 1996, 2001). Moreover, ethnographic accounts usually had not focused sufficiently upon the material dimension that is crucial for archaeologists to be able to detect and interpret feasting in the record of material remains of the past revealed through excavation. This problem stimulated several archaeologists to undertake primary ethnographic (or ‘ethnoarchaeological’) research on feasting that has further improved understanding of the practice in various ways (e.g. Adams 2004; Arthur 2003; Clarke 2001; Dietler and Herbich 2001, 2006; Hayden 2003; Wiessner and Tumu 1998). Recently, a growing body of archaeological studies has begun to demonstrate the deep antiquity of feasting and its historical significance, in cases ranging from the ancient Near East and Egypt (Benz and Wächtler 2006; Pollock 2003; Schmandt-Besserat 2001; Smith 2003) to South, Central, and North America (Blitz 1993; Bray 2003b; Brown 2001; Clark and Blake 1994; Goldstein 2003; Jennings 2005; Kelly 2001; Knight 2001; Lau 2002; LeCount 2001; Mills 2004, 2007; Morris 1979; Phillips and Sebastian 2004; Potter 2000; Potter and Ortman 2004; Rosenswig 2007; Smith et al. 2003), prehistoric Europe (Benz and Gramsch 2006; Dietler 1990, 1996, 1999, 2006b; Müller 2006; Ralph 2005; Wright 2004), South-east and East Asia (Junker 1999; Nelson 2003) and beyond.

What all of this research has shown is that, among the various forms of ritual activity, feasts have some distinctive properties. The symbolic power of feasts derives from the fact that food and drink serve as the media of expression, and commensal hospitality constitutes the syntax in the context of a ritual of consumption. Food and drink are highly charged symbolic media because, as noted above, they are ‘embodied material culture’ produced specifically for ingestion into the body. They are a basic and continual human physiological need that are also a form of highly condensed social fact embodying relations of production and exchange and linking the domestic and political economies in a highly personalized way. Moreover, although eating and drinking are among the few biologically essential acts, they are never simply biological acts. Rather, they are learned ‘*techniques du corps*’ (Mauss 1935)—culturally patterned techniques of bodily comportment that are expressive in a fundamental way of identity and difference. Moreover, people consume not abstract calories or protein, but food and drink: a form of material culture subject to almost unlimited possibilities for variation in terms of ingredients, techniques of preparation, patterns of association and exclusion, modes of serving and consumption, aesthetic evaluations, and so forth. This presents the potential for a vast array of highly charged symbolic elaborations of foodways. However, it must be remembered that food is not only a sign system, and its consumption is not only the consumption of signs. It is also a material construction of the self in much more than a figurative sense, and the study of feasting should also be grounded in analysis of the material conditions and social relations of production and distribution.

Both food and drink are a highly perishable form of material good, the full politico-symbolic potential of which is realized in the performative drama of public consumption events that constitute a prime arena for the reciprocal conversion of what Bourdieu (1990) metaphorically called ‘symbolic capital’ and economic capital. Public distribution and consumption of a basic need derives added symbolic salience from its demonstration of confidence and managerial skill in the realm of production. More importantly, however, consumption is played out in the

extremely potent idiom of commensal hospitality. Commensality is a powerfully expressive trope of intimacy that creates and reproduces relationships capable of encompassing even sustained aggressive competition by effectively euphemizing it in a symbolic practice that encourages collective misrecognition of the self-interested nature of the process. This feature is crucial to understanding the political dimensions of feasting rituals.

3 FEASTING AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY

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Feasts serve a wide variety of important structural roles in the broader political economy. They create and maintain social relations that bind people together in various intersecting groups and networks on a wide range of scales, from the local household cluster to the regional political community. For example, they are extremely important in establishing sentiments of friendship, kinship, and group solidarity, as well as in cementing bonds between affine groups and political links between leaders of various kinds. In this sense, they perform, at a variety of scales, the classic integrative function of creating community that was identified by earlier functionalist analysts of ritual (Bell 1997; Turner 1969). Feasting rituals, in effect, act as a form of symbolic metaproduction, constituting and euphemizing broader social relations in terms of the basic commensal unit.

Among other things, this enables feasts to act frequently as the nodal contexts that articulate regional exchange systems: commensal hospitality establishes relationships between exchange partners, affines, or political leaders, and provides the social ambiance for the exchange of valuables, bridewealth, and other goods which circulate through a region. Feasts may also provide the main context for the arbitration of disputes, the passing of legal judgments, and the public acting out of sanctions (ridicule, mimicry, ostracism, etc.) that maintain social control within a community. In the religious sphere, these 'social dramas' of consumption also serve to reinforce commitment to basic religious values and to provide links to the gods or ancestors that can also be used to define the structure of relations between social groups or categories within a region or community (see Bell 1997: 120–8). In the form of 'work feasts', they also provide a crucial mechanism for the process of labour mobilization that underlies the political economy and they serve to articulate indirect conversions between spheres of exchange (see Dietler and Herbich 2001).

It is important to emphasize that feasting is not simply a feature of state politics or elite classes or status groups: this practice permeates all levels of society and operates in a wide range of social formations. Recent studies have demonstrated well the significance of feasting to the construction of power and status in various state structures ranging from Mesopotamia to Mycenae, the Maya, and many others (e.g. Bray 2003a; Dietler 1999, 2001; Dietler and Hayden 2001; Jennings 2005; Lau 2002; LeCount 2001; Rosenswig 2007; Wright 2004). Given the scale and frequent ostentation of state- or elite-sponsored feasting, this is likely to be the form most immediately visible to archaeologists. But feasting is also a feature of social practice at other levels of these same state societies, often in different forms, and it is equally crucial to political action in societies without social classes, centralized political structures, or formal political roles (see Blitz 1993; Clark and Blake 1994; Dietler 1990, 1996, 2001; Dietler and Hayden 2001; Hayden 1990, 1996, 2001, 2003; Potter 2000; Mills 2004; Sadr 2004). Understanding the ways feasting operates in these diverse contexts

requires moving beyond examination of general structural roles to explore the dynamic nature of feasts as privileged ritual sites of micro-political and economic practice and the implications this has for social change.

4 FEASTS AND COMMENSAL POLITICS

Feasting is a form of ‘commensal politics’ (Dietler 1996). That is, like other ritual, it has an inherently political dimension (Bell 1997; Kelly and Kaplan 1990; Kertzer 1988), but with some distinctively specific aspects. Commensal hospitality may be viewed as a specialized form of gift exchange that establishes the same relations of reciprocal obligation between host and guest as between donor and receiver in the exchange of other more durable types of objects (Mauss 1966; Sahlin 1972). The major difference is that food is destroyed in the act of commensal consumption at a feast, and destroyed by ingesting it into the body. This is a very literal embodiment of the gift and the social debt that it engenders. Aside from the powerful symbolic dimension of this practice, it also results in the pragmatic fact 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 labour in order to fulfil reciprocal obligations.

Commensal hospitality is a practice that serves to establish, reproduce, and transform social relations. This is why feasts are often viewed as mechanisms of social solidarity that serve to create a sense of community. However, as Mauss (1966) long ago pointed out these are relations of reciprocal obligation that, while establishing social bonds, simultaneously serve to create and define differences in status. The relationship of giver to receiver, or host to guest, translates into a relationship of social superiority and inferiority unless and until the equivalent can be returned. In this feature, the potential of hospitality to be manipulated as a tool in defining social relations, lies the crux of commensal politics. The hospitality of feasting is, of course, only one of many potential fields of political action that may be variably articulated. Feasting may be strategically used by individuals or groups 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; Lemonnier 1990; Modjeska 1982; Strathern 1971). 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 prestation it is perhaps the most effective at subtly euphemizing the self-interested nature of the process and creating a shared ‘sincere fiction’ (in Bourdieu’s phrase, 1990: 112) of disinterested generosity.

Furthermore, like all ritual, feasts provide a site and a medium for the highly condensed symbolic representation of social relations. However, again as with other ritual, they express idealized concepts: the way people *believe* relations exist, or should exist, rather than how they are necessarily manifested in daily activity. Such representations may either camouflage, naturalize, or contest asymmetries of power; and struggles over the control of representations and their interpretation by differentially situated actors are an important site of historical change. However, 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 and groups can use feasting to compete against each other without questioning a shared vision of the social order that the feast reproduces and naturalizes, or they can use feasting to simultaneously struggle for personal position *and* promote contrasting visions of the proper structure of the social world.

5 TYPES OF FEASTS

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A variety of more or less useful classifications of feasts and feasting have been proposed based upon a range of criteria. These include such things as the scale of inclusion of participants (household feasts, neighborhood feasts, community feasts, etc.), the specific cultural contexts (funerary feasts, marriage feasts, initiation feasts, war feasts, curing feasts, harvest feasts, etc.), social and economic functions (religious feasts, labour feasts, community celebrations, solidarity feasts, economic feasts, etc.), or differences in the symbolic logic of modes of commensal politics (empowering feasts, patron-role feasts, and diacritical feasts) (e.g. see Adams 2004; Benz and Gramsch 2006; Dietler 1996, 2001; Hayden 2001; Kirch 2001; LeCount 2001; Turkon 2004). The heuristic value of such classifications is, of course, entirely relative to the problems they are intended to solve, the subtlety of the analysis they permit, and their logical consistency. None can provide a straightforward correspondence to consistently characteristic types of material signatures (e.g. rare foods, large quantities of food, exceptional serving vessels, special locations or architectonic distinction, etc.) because of the multitude of ways that feasts can be symbolically distinguished from daily meals and the fact that these can overlap with the ways that food is used to create status and category distinctions among consumers. This renders Hayden's (2001) desire for a single archaeological typology of feasting based on types of material remains a quixotic goal, as the interpretation of feasting evidence in the archaeological record must always rely upon richly textured and culturally specific contextual arguments grounded in a cross-cultural theoretical understanding of the complexities of feasting in order to determine what roles the practice was serving and how it worked in a particular case. This is not to say, however, that greater attention to the material attributes of feasting is not warranted. Quite the contrary: it is essential (see Adams 2004; Clarke 2001; Hayden 2003; Turkon 2004).

It is also important to be aware that, like other ritual, feasting is a polysemic activity: several different social roles may be served by the same event. Hence, what one analyst might classify as an 'alliance and cooperation feast' may be simultaneously serving economic and status distinction functions: these need not be separate *kinds* of feasts. For example, a 'work feast' used to mobilize labour may be at the same time creating prestige and social capital, sentiments of community, and social category distinctions. Indeed, nearly all feasts actually serve in some ways to define social boundaries while simultaneously creating a sense of community. That is, nearly all feasts serve to mark, reify, and inculcate diacritical distinctions between social groups, categories, and statuses while at the same time establishing relationships across the boundaries that they define. Gender categories and age distinctions, for example, are very commonly signalled through feasting even among peoples with a strongly egalitarian political ethos. Such categorical differentiation

between men and women, between elders and younger men, and between kinship groups are commonly signalled at feasts by permutations of such things as (1) spatial distinctions (i.e. segregation or other structured differential positioning of individuals or groups while eating), (2) temporal distinctions (such as the order of serving or consumption), (3) qualitative distinctions (in the kinds of food, drink, or service vessels that different people are given or are allowed to consume), (4) quantitative distinctions (in the relative amounts of food or drink served to different categories of people), or (5) behavioural distinctions (i.e. differences in expected bodily comportment between different categories of people 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, etc.). 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 insider vs. stranger distinctions. Concepts of ethnicity, for example, very frequently involve beliefs (of variable accuracy) about distinctive food tastes and culinary practices. Feasts can be a theatre for the symbolic manipulation of such culinary distinctions in the expression of sentiments of inclusion and exclusion at various levels.

As noted earlier, the meaning of a feast event both derives from and plays upon the meaning of consumption in the context of daily meals, but is, at the same time, dramatically transformed by the symbolic framing devices that distinguish it as a theatre of ritual action. The ways in which feasts are symbolically marked as distinct from daily practice are variable, and extremely important to understand. This fact poses certain dangers for archaeological interpretation because similar symbolic devices 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 (or those used to mark different kinds of feasts) for those used to differentiate, for example, social classes in societies having 'diacritical' feasts. In many cases, this former distinction (i.e. marking feasts as ritual events) is accomplished simply by differences in the sheer quantity of food and drink proffered and consumed, or by a change in the location and/or timing of consumption. However, the same types of devices used as symbolic diacritica in marking social distinctions may be employed to distinguish ritual from quotidian practice. For example, either feasts or categories of people may be marked by special foods (e.g. ones which are expensive, rare, exotic, especially rich, particularly sweet, intoxicating, etc.). Alternatively, special service vessels or other paraphernalia (including special forms of clothing or other bodily adornment), or special architectural staging, may be employed for this marking purpose. Finally, atypical complexity in recipes or in the structured order of service and consumption may also be used to invoke such distinctions (see Douglas 1984).

There is no simple, universal rule of thumb that will enable the archaeologist to distinguish readily between practices marking boundaries between categories of events or persons. But disentangling the symbolic logic is possible for archaeologists through careful and critical evaluation of the contextual and associational patterns of the evidence and a multi-stranded, thickly textured interpretive argument. To use 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 event-marking practices; whereas those found exclusively in male graves, but in *all* male graves, probably imply both a ritual and categorical distinction; while huge, ostentatious bronze drinking

vessels found only in a limited number of very wealthy burials most likely indicate the operation of 'diacritical feasts' in marking social class. But the plausibility of such an interpretation will depend upon other evidence from settlement data as well.

6 FEASTING AND GENDER

As noted earlier, gender is one cultural category of social identity that is nearly everywhere marked, reified, 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 1976; Child et al. 1965; Counihan and Kaplan 1998; Dietler 1990, 2001; Gefou-Madianou 1992; McDonald 1994). Such categorical boundary-marking at feasts may be based upon various permutations of the kinds of symbolic diacritica noted above. These patterns of gender differentiation may also vary greatly between social classes, such that behaviour considered appropriate for women may be quite different in upper and lower class contexts within the same society.

It is also important to emphasize that feasting practices, while marking boundaries of gender identities in the ways noted above, simultaneously express relationships of mutual dependence across those boundaries, which, in turn, represent and naturalize ideologies structuring larger societal relations of production and authority. In addition to the various aspects of symbolic representation noted above, feasting frequently is sustained by a gendered asymmetry in terms of labour and benefits. Specifically, women, by providing the agricultural and, especially, culinary labour that are essential for feasts, very often largely support 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. Boserup 1970: 37; Clark 1980; Dietler and Herbich 2001; Friedman 1984; Geschire 1982; Lemonnier 1990; Vincent 1971).

Whether one interprets this as labour 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). While exploitation is frequently a justifiable analytical conclusion, this 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 labour 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 labour by being members of an influential household or lineage (in matrilineal contexts). Their labour (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 commensal relations with the gods (e.g. Gero 1992; March 1998). And, in many societies, women do host their own work feasts and other feast events, although usually on a smaller scale than men.

The relationship between feasts and gender is clearly a complex but analytically rich and important one. Feasts are intimately implicated in the representation, reproduction, and transformation of gender identity, as well as in the gendered 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, and that gender must be an essential consideration in any analysis of feasting (Bray 2003c; Dietler 2001; Gero 1992).

7 FASTING

Fasting may be defined as *voluntary* complete or partial abstention from consuming food and/or drink for a period of time. The voluntary aspect distinguishes fasting from periods of hunger or famine imposed by economic or ecological conditions. Like feasting, fasting is a symbolic act that is wrapped in ritual and frequently accompanies rites of passage. Practices such as dieting for weight loss and anorexia nervosa (defined as pathological food avoidance) that are distinctive to certain Western societies in recent periods (and especially to women in those societies) have an ambiguous relationship to ritual fasting, although they also have a strongly symbolic component (Bell 1997; Counihan 1998; Habermas and Beveridge 1992; Reischer and Koo 2004).

Obviously, when fasting is total, it can be practised for only a limited time before death ensues. But fasting is usually highly selective in terms of both the categories of food and drink to be avoided and the timing of such avoidance: for example, the Roman Catholic practice of not eating meat on Fridays is a targeted form of fasting with categorical and temporal limits. Fasting can also be practised either over an extended period of time (e.g. a hunger strike), or intermittently (e.g. Mormon Fast Sundays), or both (e.g. Islamic Ramadan, in which fasting extends over a month, but for only part of each day).

Fasting in some form has been a significant part of the ritual practices of most of the major world religions for centuries, as well as many other religious traditions studied by anthropologists (e.g. Buitelaar 1993; Bynum 1987; Grimm 1996; Lambert 2003; Rader 1987). It is used to show piety, devotion, penitence, and self-control, to effect purification in preparation for certain tasks or ritual transformations, and to provoke altered states of consciousness. But fasting has also been deployed as a non-religious ritual, including especially the political hunger strike as a form of non-violent protest (Ellmann 1993).

Like feasting, fasting relies upon a semiotic connection to daily food consumption for its symbolic force: daily consumption patterns will determine such things as what foods are to be avoided, when consumption can occur, and who participates together. Fasts sometimes also involve the substitution of certain unusual or less desirable foods for more common ones rather than complete abstention, and these choices also depend upon a relationship to the structure of daily consumption. Fasting is also frequently linked in an intimate way to feasting. For example, feasting frequently marks the beginning or end of a fast (as with Mardi Gras, Eid, and feasts ending various initiation fasts), and alternate rituals of fasting and feasting may structure temporality over the course of the year. However, fasting plays upon the trope of refusal or negation of consumption rather than elaboration. When done individually, for example by anorexic individuals in Western societies, this can constitute a symbolic rejection of sociality (Bell 1985; Brumberg 1988; Bynum 1987). But fasting generally has a collective aspect and, every bit as much as feasting, it serves as an instrument for the construction of community, social identity, and prestige (Knutsson and Selinus 1970).

Over the past century, a significant literature on fasting has emerged from the fields of social anthropology, history, theology, medicine, and psychology (e.g. Buitelaar 1993; Bynum 1987;

Lambert 2003; Rader 1987), along with many ethnographic and historical studies that document the practice without a primary focus on it (e.g. Malinowski 1922; Powdermaker 1960; Richards 1939; Shack 1971; Young 1971). But the topic has received relatively little attention in archaeology. Unlike feasting, fasting is virtually impossible to detect archaeologically in the absence of texts. The practice of fasting requires no material equipment, and episodes of collective fasting are not usually long enough to cause major bodily trauma that might be detected through, for example, osteological or bone chemistry analysis. And even if such traces of trauma were to be found, it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to differentiate them from trauma caused by non-voluntary forms of nutritional deprivation, such as famines or the lean times of periodic hunger that often precede the harvest in many agrarian societies (Shipton 1990). Some scholars have attempted to use such things as stable isotope analysis of human bone to complement textual records in evaluating the impact of fasting in historical periods (e.g. see Müldner and Richards 2005). But the search for evidence of fasting in prehistoric periods remains far more problematic than that for traces of feasting, and we know correspondingly less about its potential existence and significance.

SUGGESTED READING

Feasting and fasting are two alternative ways to mobilize the symbolic power of food and drink, through either ritualized commensal consumption or refusal of consumption. Feasting has become a popular theme in recent archaeological work, with several edited volumes offering a good perspective on the range of theoretical and methodological approaches and epistemological issues. See especially Dietler and Hayden (2001), Bray (2003a), Mills (2004), and Wright (2004). A number of individual articles and books have also served as key contributions to the development of the theoretical analysis of feasting in archaeology and cultural anthropology, including Powdermaker (1932), Codere (1950), Friedman (1979), Dietler (1990, 1996), Hayden (1990, 1996), Lemonnier (1990), Gero (1992), Clark and Blake (1994). Because of its archaeological invisibility, fasting has failed to attract the same attention among archaeologists, although it has been a subject of anthropological and historical research. See especially Knutsson and Selinus (1970), Bynum (1987), Habermas and Beveridge (1992), Buitelaar (1993), Ellman (1993), Grimm (1996), Counihan (1998), Lambert (2003), Reischer and Koo (2004).

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