

Practices concerning the Sharing of Plant-Based Food among Women Baka Hunter-Gatherers

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Background

Food sharing is major characteristic of hunter-gatherer societies and is analyzed in many studies. There are various discussions on why hunter-gatherers share food: some studies focus on the ecological factors and the others emphasize socio-cultural factors. However, these discussions have concentrated only on meat sharing by men, and food sharing among women has not been sufficiently analyzed. Egalitarianism is a feature in hunter-gatherer societies that negates the social hierarchy. Food sharing plays an important role in realizing equality in the community. Thus, this study on food sharing contributes not only to the literature on food sharing habits and diet, but to the understanding of the social basis of hunter-gatherer societies.

Research purpose and outline

The aim of this study is to clarify the functions and socio-cultural meaning of food sharing by women in hunter-gatherer societies through the observation of negotiations pertaining to food sharing. Field research was conducted in a Baka Pygmy community in L Village, Messok District, Haut-Nyong Province, East Region, Republic of Cameroon. I focused on three points of the women's activities: subsistence activities, food sharing and communication concerning food. Research was conducted by interviews and observations regarding the procurement of food, cooking, and the serving of food on the plates.



Picture 1: Woman peeling a cassava



Picture 2: Woman mashing the leaves of a cassava

Results and achievements of the fieldwork

The Baka's main subsistence methods are hunting-gathering and cultivation. In L Village, cassava and plantains are staple foods, but their fields are generally small. Therefore, the women acquire most of their staple foods from the neighboring Bantu farmers' fields. I studied the food-sharing practices of 26 adult Baka women, with research findings are as follows.

First, from a survey measuring field area and foods produced, no significant differences in food acquirement were detected. The size of the fields impacts the production of food, and the acquired food becomes almost equal. Food sharing does not dissolve food inequality, but rather it affects other aspects such as social relationships. Second, during the cooking practice, some types of food sharing were observed. For instance, in some cases, food is shared without direct negotiation, but in other cases, foods are shared with direct or indirect demands. I observed such interesting cases wherein the food giver did not negotiate the taker of the food because a child rather than the woman herself carried the dish. These cases seem to be among the keys to understanding food sharing among women.

This field survey indicates that food sharing occurs not only through ecological reasons for equalizing the food supply, but also as a result of various interactions among people with conditions and facts. There may be some rules and norms pertaining to food sharing, but those rules are not absolute. The ambiguity and flexibility in such rules should be the most important features in the Baka community. For instance, even if a woman could not give or receive food to or from another woman, mistrust or friction between them can be rationalized by saying that "it was by accident." By "dispersing the responsibility" concerning sharing and eating food in this way, it is possible to share food while maintaining good social relationships.



Picture 3: Girls bringing the meals



Picture 4: Woman dishing up meals

Implications of the research and future studies

This research focused on adult women, but the activities of children and men regarding food sharing in this specific village have not been analyzed. Also, the women's thought processes during food acquirement and cooking are unclear. With respect to these two issues, in the next study I will try to examine food sharing as a phenomenon that includes children and men, and I will attempt to clarify recognition issues pertaining to women's sharing activities.



Picture 5: Boiled cassava and cooked bush meat



Picture 6: Plantain banana and mushroom meal