

## Meanings and taboos in traditional gastronomy of Maasai communities in Kajiado County, Kenya

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### KEYWORDS

Maasai, food norm, taboo, pastoralism, food, foodways.

### ABSTRACT

*The article analyses food traditions among the Maasai of Kajiado County. It explores them on the basis of an ethnographic research conducted between 2017 and 2018. In particular, it investigates the cultural meanings and taboos associated with blood, meat and milk: key elements in the traditional Maasai diet. In a context of development studies interested in fostering nutrition transition among indigenous people, the article advocates for an approach to food study that does not focus only on the nutritional aspect of food but encompasses the analysis of cultural meaning and taboos in order to fully appreciate the social role played by traditional foodways in improving social cohesion.*

Even just by browsing through the most common anthropology handbooks, the reader recognizes the consistent attention of the discipline to the Maasai. They are one of the largest Nilotic ethnic groups, inhabiting central and southern Kenya and northern Tanzania (Parker and Rathbone 2007), one of the most known groups in East Africa, due to their characteristic clothes and aesthetics, and bond with their cattle herds, often pointed out as a scholarly example of pastoralists society.

While, since the early modern ethnographic studies, anthropologists have interrogated the process of identity construction among these people (e.g. Hodgson 2001; Lawson, et al. 2014; Spencer 2004), in a more recent past, the attention has moved also towards their gastronomy. Ethnobiological and ethnopharmacological studies, for example, pointed out the rich traditional knowledge concerning the use of wild herbs and plants for food and medicinal purposes (e.g. Kimondo, et al. 2015; Roulette, et al. 2018; Tibuhwa 2012), as well as the pastoralist practices and use of the herds (Caudell, et al. 2017; Mwangi 2016; Orech and Schwarz 2017; van der Meer, et al. 2015). In particular, recent literature has assessed traditional dietary practices pointing them out as possible causes for social marginality (e.g. Chege, et al. 2015; Fenton, et al. 2012; Lawson, et al. 2014; Wishitemi, et al. 2015). Promoting transformation and change those studies indicated possible alternatives; however, they tend overlooking the social and cultural role of traditional practices.

While a common problem in the development of policies is an oversimplification of the social and cultural phenomena (Gardner and Lewis 2015; Mosse 2011), this paper contributes to the debate

pointing out the depth and thickness of Maasai food traditions. In so doing, based on an ethnographic research conducted in Kajiado County, Kenya, it highlights the emergent cultural meanings associated to food, in particular, livestock derivatives such as milk, blood, and meat. In highlighting cultural values and taboos, the paper points out how traditional food represents a fundamental element of social cohesion.

The paper opens by indicating the social role of food and food taboos. After presenting the main features of the research, the paper contextualizes the main elements of Maasai gastronomy. Through the words of the informants, the paper outlines the social meanings of blood, meat, and milk, and fosters a broader reflection about the role of cultural meanings and taboos associated to food for the Maasai community.

The authors equally contributed to the paper reporting and analyzing the data collected during the field research. Field research was conducted by Leah Lekanayia and directed by Michele F. Fontefrancesco.

### **Food as a cultural object.**

Food is a cultural object. This simple sentence summarizes a long intellectual history developed by anthropologists in more than a century (Müller 2005). While in food and foodways diversity, the early anthropologists may have seen a fundamental element for their evolutionary theories (e.g. Tylor 1903), since Levi-Strauss (1964) scholars have reconsidered the cultural significance of cooking. Selecting materials, transforming them through air, fire, earth, and water, and turning them into food (Levi-Strauss 1965) is a semantic act that imbues the nutrient with cultural and social meanings (Mangano and Marrone 2013; Marrone and Giannitrapani 2012). It makes food a fundamental tool for not just nurturing the individual's body but also for reinforcing the intangible body of society (Druker 2003; Sutton 2001; Wilk 1999).

It is not just by having access to food, but also by being forbidden from consuming it that society is performed and created. By precluding the access to food to specific groups, a taboo creates an identity, singularizes the group and turns it into a distinguishable entity within the society; this is the main cultural and social role of food taboo (Leypey and Fomine 2009). While, it is well-known the anthropological debate about the origins of food taboos, rather than to be interested whether they are the result of environmental adaptation (Harris 1985) or the derivation of the community's worldview (Douglas 1966), this article considers their social significance.

In over seventy years, the debate about development had at its center the themes of food access and correct diet (Escobar 1995; Gardner and Lewis 2015; Shiva 1988). In particular, this history is dotted by too many failures in implementing new policies and practices. Most of the fiascos linked to the willing decision of the local community to not embrace the proposed guidelines. This article starts from the assumption that the reason of this reluctance is linked to ignorance: not of the local communities, but of the researchers who mostly forget to interrogate the actual meaning that food and foodways have in the communities.

In order to give a positive contribution to the debate, the paper explores the meaning and taboos linked by Maasai communities to their traditional food, highlighting the role food have in reinforcing

their society. In fact, while Lyana and Manimbulu (2014) assert that culture influences diets adopted and, consequently, food security status of households, the fragmented information concerning the underlying meanings of Maasai gastronomy creates a need for a better investigation of this aspect of Maasai heritage, not just for the sake of cultural appreciation, but also for supporting in their community development.

## The research

The research originated within the international development project “Sustainable Agri-food System Strategies” participated by the University of Gastronomic Sciences. It was conducted in three areas, the one of Imbirikani, Eselenkei and Olgulului Group ranches, located nearby Loitokitok, a town in Kajiado County with an estimated population of 150.000 units. The town lies approximately 255 kilometers southeast of Nairobi, in a semi-arid, hilly area close to the border with Tanzania, not far from Mukulat, one of the main centers of Maasai history and religious life (Greg 2004).

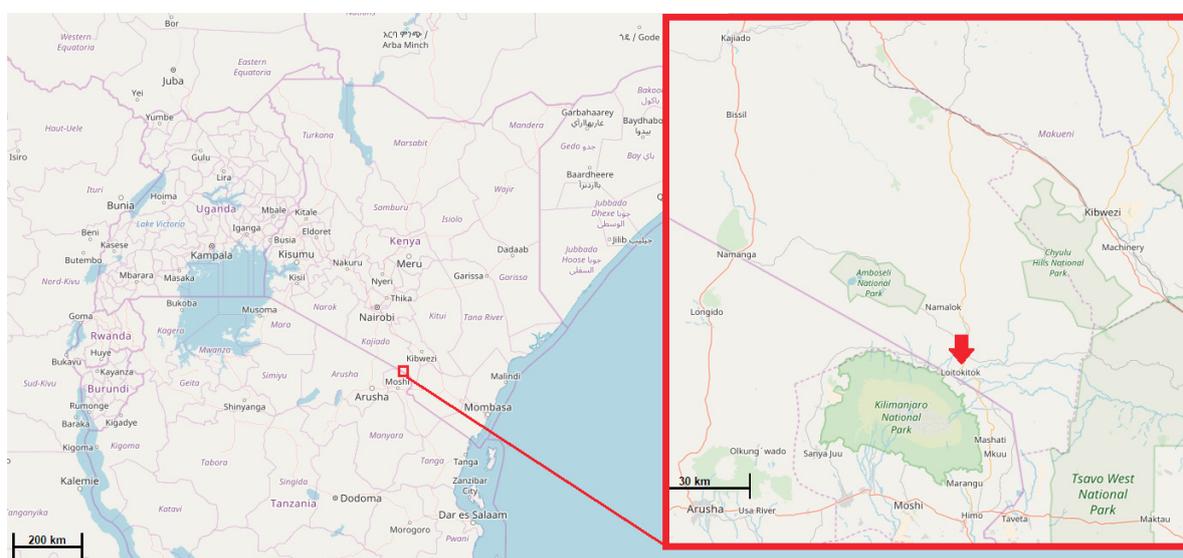


Figure 1: Map of the area of research elaborated on the basis of the OpenStreetMap cartography.

The ethnographic research was conducted by one of the authors, Ms. Lekanayia, from December 2017 to February 2018 and involved the administration of a questionnaire to the informants, focus groups and in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Focus groups and interviews were conducted in particular with the elders (both male and female) of the community. The research investigated the oral history of Maasai people, the common foods consumed by the Maasai people, the socio-cultural context of dietary practices, the importance of individual's food choice and preference in the preservation of cultural norms, the social meaning of food and food taboos, the ritual aspects concerning the community's foodways and the transformation of food practice in time. Particular attention was given to the preparation consumed specifically by age groups and the strategies involved in food sourcing and making.

Overall, the research involved 6 focus groups, whose panels consisted of five Maasai elders each, and 93 interviews conducted during fieldwork. The research was conducted in each *manyatta* (tr. settlement) of the area, overall investigating 71 households.

All the activities were conducted in Maasai language, being the mother tongue of the researcher. The following extracts from the interviews were translated from Maasai into English by the researcher.

### **A pastoralist gastronomy**

The Maasai people are one of the largest Nilotic ethnic groups in Eastern Africa, with an overall population estimated between 500.000 and 1.000.000 units, inhabiting central and southern Kenya and northern Tanzania. They are a pastoral population, settled in the present area at the end of the Nineteenth century, after relocation by the British colonial authority. Despite the attempts of the British authorities of imposing Western costumes, the group maintained their semi-nomadic pastoralist activity and the core of their cultural heritage. Since Kenyan and Tanzanian independence from Britain in the 1960s, land ownership has changed dramatically, and modern traditional cultivation techniques and setting of grazing boundaries in the Maasai district limited pastoralist activity. These transformations, and the ongoing urbanization of Maasai, attracted by the larger cities seeking new jobs and occupations, affected dietary patterns, by introducing new ingredients and preparations, expanding the consumption of vegetable products, as pastoral food stocks become scarce in the household context (Bekure 1991). Despite these innovations, the present pattern of the Maasai food and foodways are still ideally fully based on livestock product, following a pattern shared by other Nilotic semi-nomadic pastoralist populations, such as the Nuer (Evans-Pritchard 1940). This is reflected by the centrality of cow and goat products, in particular, blood, meat, and milk, while cheese-making is particularly limited due to environmental constraints. Those products are placed at the center of food habits, while other products, such as vegetables, are limited to a complementary role of siders or used to enrich and balance their diet as in the case of spontaneous herbs, such as okiloriti (*Acacia Nilotica*), used as a spice for its effects as digestive aid, flavoring, and nervous system stimulant as well as for its anticancer, anti-mutagenic, anti-inflammatory, antimicrobial, antifungal, anthelmintic, antidiarrheal, and antiplatelet- aggregation properties (Maundu, et al. 2001).

Considering this particular dietary configuration, food is consumed in differing contexts by differing age and gender groups. In particular, animal products not only serve the purpose of a meal or nourishment of the body, they also serve a symbolic function being the symbolic and pragmatic use closely linked (Mintz and Du Bois 2002). Food, in particular pastoralist products, is a code that conveys a message about the different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transitions across boundaries. (Holtzman 2006; Phillips 2006)

### **Blood, meat and milk and the social role of food.**

Thus, it does not surprise blood, meat and milk are not treated as mere ingredients for particular preparation but rather maintain their strong, traditional symbolic meaning.

*“Blood is one of the important meals to us as Maasai people, this is because blood is available at all seasons whether there is abundance of rain or not,”* explained Mr. Nkayiayia, son of the most important medicine man and rainmaker of Olgulului area and oldest member of the community, the 4th December 2017 after he officiated a wedding.

*However, it is important to note that the rain season starts in October. This month is also called olapa looilkisirat (tr. the milk drops in the milking gourd). During this season livestock*

*are slaughtered every two weeks and milk is also integrated in the blood and meat diet. In this period the blood collected from a living animal, especially heifers and bulls, is then mixed with kule nairowa (tr. warm fresh milk) directly from the animal, both products are consumed raw. This meal is important because in the beginning of the rain season milk is not yet enough. The low quantity of milk is because lactating cows are few. When there is enough milk blood is consumed by mixing it with kule naoto (tr. ripe milk or curdled milk). Kule naoto is made when there is excess milk that cannot be consumed on time so to avoid spoilage the milk is fermented for later use. This product was considered as a sign of wealth and was always served to the head of the family and his guest.*

Blood and blood consumption are, thus, culturally connotated and linked to the ideas of strength and wealth. In particular, their consumption is linked to dry season (July – October). This is the traditional period of the year when cows are butchered and meat is prepared in a way that preserved it for later use, by frying it in its own fat and later storing it under the fat, what is called *olpurda*, or frying further until it becomes dry and crunchy, which will be stored in a cool dry place. Mrs. Sintiyio, one of the oldest midwives of Kuku, and wife of the *olaigwanani* (tr. community adviser) who was also the chief of the community during colonial time, explained on the 13th December 2017:

*During (dry season) the Maasai community is in constant movement in search of pasture and water for their livestock. The amount of milk available at this period is not enough to feed families. As the Maasai are already adapted to this phenomenon, they are organized into groups called *ilmareita lolmarei*, which is singular for *ilmareita* to be made up of five families which live together in one *manyatta*. From this month every family gives the largest oxen that will be slaughtered and is consumed by all the five families. This means that in this period there are five oxen to be slaughtered. This ox is called *orkiteng le matua* and is consumed for a month by the five families. The meat is divided to all the categories of people with respect to age and gender. The skin of the oxen was given to the women who would cut out the fat attached to the skin. This fat is mixed with blood and is cooked to brown meal called *inkontek*. *Inkotentek* is stored under oil in large containers for later use, when the meat is finished. A spoon full of *inkontek* is served to children at lunch and/or dinner. In this period nothing is left to waste, because even the skin of the oxen is sometimes roasted and scratched with a knife to get rid of the hair. When it is soft it is minced using buffalo horn to form a meal, called *orkisar*. The drought can proceed for a longer period than expected. In such situations blood becomes a very important source of nourishment. Blood is cooked for long periods of time and till small clots are formed. This meal is called *inkipot naiorowa*. The other way of preparation is cooking the blood for a short time mix with herb. Served to the children, this meal is called *inkipot nairobi*.*

After blood, meat is another important, symbolic meal of the Maasai community. The most common methods of preparation are roasting and boiling, for preparing *imotori* (tr. soup) using barks or roots and stems. Meat consumption is a strong marker for gender, being mostly consumed by men, and this understanding come intertwined with explicit taboos, as pointed out by Mr. Lenturuai, an *olaitapajani lo nkoon* (tr. traditional teacher). In the interview occurred in January 2018, after his lesson on the culture to the initiates that went through curcumin in December, he explained:

*After initiation a man that consumes meat from an animal that has been slaughtered by women is considered unclean and less of a man amongst his peers. So, to avoid breaking of this taboo slaughtering of animals is done in the bush and any woman that gets close to the slaughter place gets a punishment, which could be physical beating or might be ordered to eat all the meat.*

*One of the reasons behind this rule belongs to the fact that animals, children and women are owned by men. Therefore, allowing a woman to lead these activities is demeaning to the man. As the heads of the families, men are believed to be efficient in sharing meat. Women are perceived as individualistic and might just share food, with her immediate family members, leaving out the rest. Men are the owners of livestock so eating away from the sight of women allows them to take the noble parts of the animals without feeling guilty. Men consumed the fleshiest parts of the animal especially the ribs and other parts, while women are given liver, tripe, intestines and the hind limb of the animal.*

The third element, milk, is fundamental to different aspects of the Maasai traditions. Mrs. Sintiyio, a farmer interviewed on 16th December, explained, when asked about the importance of milk in the Maasai culture:

*Milk is used to clean the knife that will be used to perform this emuratare (the rite) and also to bless the boy or girl to be circumcised. Milk is also used for Ilamala, a fertility ceremony held for women. Moreover, milk is used in the naming ceremony of the newborns. According to the tradition, this is achieved by diluting the milk with water, and then it is used to wet the hair of the newborn and the mother. The hair is cut before the name is suggested. The use of milk for ceremonies is also present in another ritual called eunoto. Eunoto is a ceremony where by the ilmurrans (tr. Warrior) graduate from warrior stage to Elder. The elders walk around a group of ilmurrans chanting in prayers and blessing the warriors by sprinkling the milk on them from a round shaped gourd called emalla.*

Milk production and consumption, like meat's, are strongly gendered and governed by precise taboos. They were highlighted by Mr. Parasiato, interviewed in December 2017:

*Milking is done by women and all the milk obtained is managed by women and considered to be entirely a women's chore. Milk is a very important meal for us. The only taboo when it comes to milk consumption is that ilmurrans (tr. warriors) don't drink milk alone or eat any other meal alone. The taboo is meant to ensure that those who cannot get food are not left out. Maasai warriors are the soldiers that protect the community and should be well nourished at all times. Once a woman serves the milk or any other food to the warriors, she leaves the house to let the warrior eat alone. This is done to ensure that nobody sees the warriors eating, what is considered poor food like ugali (tr. corn meal) and all the other meals that do not take origin from animals.*

Blood, meat, and milk, thus, are meaningful cultural objects in the context of Maasai foodscape. Their use is governed by a strict rituality that is expressive and reinforces relationships with social life, marking age and gender.

As Remotti (2007) pointed out that it is through limiting and removing, through cutting and shaping that humanity expresses its cultural being, taboos appear the key elements for gastronomic signification. The structure of the taboos highlighted by the informants confirms and reinforces the universalistic segmentary structure of the Maasai society (Eisenstad 1959). In particular, they reinforce the distinction between male and female role, and in the case of men the belonging to specific age groups. For example, Mr. Parsiato explained:

*Men in the past ate their meals in the wild where no one could see them. This was because the warriors were perceived to be fearless and perfect, and whatever they consumed was consumed together and in seclusion to ensure a sense of solidarity and perfect equality. Therefore, to maintain this secluded way of eating in a modern home context the warriors made sure that everyone else including the woman who prepared the meals leaves them alone as they eat. The other reason is that, in the recent past the cultivators have introduced meals of the plant origin, which was considered inferior by the Maasai people. To maintain their perfect nature, at least as assumed by the community the warriors ate in seclusion.*

As taboos create separation, they also create identity and solidarity among the single group, reinforcing its social cohesion and solidarity. This is significantly the case of men attending initiation, mentioned above, that will end up belonging to the same age group sharing a common political and social position within society.

In front of this complex bundle of meanings, the social significance of traditional dietary habits emerges clearly. The choice of particular ingredients or foodways does not depend just on the individual's taste, nor to a straight-forwards medical preference, or, even, the easy accessibility to the particular food source in the environment. Rather, it hinges on the very role the individual or the social group should perform within society and how that food helps, tangibly and intangibly, her or him to achieve it. Thus, to advocate any form of nutrition transition, it is necessary to interrogate the meaning of food and not just its nutraceutical profile. Without this touch, any scholarly recommendation for change will be ignored because, the research pointed out, with food what is at stake it is not just the preservation of the physical body, but also and first of all the social body of the community.

## **Conclusion.**

The article investigated food traditions among the Maasai of Kajiado County. The ethnography had explored the dietary habits of the communities, highlighting how they still hinges on pastoralist practices and livestock products. The ethnographic materials have outlined the cultural meanings of three key food categories: blood, meat, and milk. They had highlighted the fundamental role played by those products in reinforcing the very structure of Maasai society. In this respect, the article suggests any program for nutrition transition should be attentive to the cultural meaning of food because without addressing also this aspect an initiative could reinforce the individual's body but would risk undermining the social body of the entire community.

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