

# H-Net Reviews

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**Jon Holtzman.** *Uncertain Tastes: Memory, Ambivalence, and the Politics of Eating in Samburu, Northern Kenya.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. ix + 285 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-25736-8; \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-25737-5.



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## Blood, Milk, and Culinary Meanings of Pastoral Change

The title of Jon Holtzman's ethnographic study of the Samburu of northern Kenya is somewhat misleading. It mixes what seem to be quite different domains—taste, memory, politics—in an ethnographic and personal narrative of a pastoral people whose pastoral identity has been dissolving at the edge of a modernizing Kenyan nation. Holtzman uses food as a measure of material culture change, as well as metaphor and marker of what the Samburu themselves understand as a descent from the culinary textures of pastoralist—blood, meat, and sour milk—to *loshorro*, their version of the ubiquitous maize porridge also known as *ugali*, *miele pap*, *nsima*, *sadza*, *gunfo*, or *papa* elsewhere in Africa's modern maize belt. For Holtzman's Samburu friends, the maize that comes from food aid or marginal plots is “gray food,” sustenance with little cultural meaning.

On the surface, *Uncertain Tastes* does not fit neatly into the new literature on food, cuisine, and cooking. That writing tends to choose sides between understanding food as bulk, as a commodity that offers fullness of the belly (e.g., Diana Wylie's *Starving on a Full Stom-*

*ach: Hunger and the Triumph of Cultural Racism in Modern South Africa* [2001]), or food/cooking as an aesthetic expression whose elaboration denotes rank, ethnic identity, erudition of knowledge, and social class (e.g., Sidney Mintz's *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom: Excursions into Eating, Culture, and the Past* [1996], James C. McCann's *Stirring the Pot: A History of African Cuisine* [2009], Paul Stoller's *The Taste of Ethnographic Things* [1989], and Arjun Aparandurai's essay “How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India” in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* [1998]). This view of food and cuisine allows the clustering of mutually intelligible culinary cultures that are inclusive and comparable across time and space. Most recently, Judith Carney and Richard Nicholas Rosomoff's 2009 book *In the Shadow of Slavery: Africa's Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World* recounts the astonishingly rich food endowments of the black Atlantic world, a story of richness rather than despair across a wide swath of cultures related by historical experience and ecology. In this view, the African story of food includes cooking as a woman's art that includes

pungency of spices, powdered capsicum, exotic oils, and overlapping maritime cultures. This take on the history and anthropology of food in Africa is exciting and cosmopolitan. Holtzman tells a far different tale of food as a marker of the loss of livelihood in an economically marginal zone.

If many studies of African food/cuisine focus, rightly, on women as the keepers of knowledge, Holtzman offers an important alternative focus. He writes the Samburu's food story with a fine personal, and subjective, touch of a small geographical and culturally homogenous area. He describes food in a pastoral culture that is in the process of losing its economic and material base. Among other aspects, he tells the reader about the lives and diet of bachelors, the *muran*, young men coming of age for

whom "gray" foods are a marker of dislocation in a modern world in which they are more marginal than their antecedents who lived in a world of pastoral abundance. Meals made of milk, blood, and meat are a memory; porridge made from store-bought maize meal is the reality.

Both lines of argument—food as fullness or food as aesthetic expression—make up parts of an exciting and growing literature on food in African studies. Holtzman's study of the meanings of food in Samburu society enlivens the ethnographic present in a way that is effectively delivered and clear in its descriptions of change in pastoral livelihood. It belongs in course syllabi on food/cuisine as a readable but sobering counterpoint to celebrations of Africa's cuisines and their arrival on global menus of affluence.

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