



Food, Pots and Gender

The conventional wisdom has been that agriculture and pots developed more or less simultaneously. Material from Africa, however, indicates that pottery was used two thousand years before the adoption of agriculture. The ceramics seem closely associated with the heavy reliance on aquatic and plant resources for boiling of food. With the change to cultivation, porridge took over as the main cooked food. In the Near East, the material shows that domesticated cereals occurred about 2000 years earlier than ceramics. There is thus a striking contrast between Africa and the Near East with regard to two fundamental cultural features generally assumed as interlinked elements of the Neolithic, namely cultivated cereals and the use of pottery.

To explore this I shall take up the question of the kind of food that was made from cereal. First as regards the Near East, where the large amount of grinders recovered shows that cereal was ground into flour. The archaeological material indicates that flour was used for making bread or bread cakes, evidence such as wear pattern on human teeth show that these were severely abraded, probably from eating gritty bread (Moore 1995; Akkermans & Schwartz 2003:74). By making cereal into bread there was no need for pots to boil the food. In Africa the cereal ground into flour seems to a large extent to have been made into porridge, which was boiled in the pots.

Symbolism of food

If we look at the food traditions within these two regions today, we see that these differences in food habits seem to be maintained to the present. In the Near East, the emphasis is on bread and meat; in Sub-Saharan Africa it is porridge (Haaland *in press*). My concern in this paper is the consumption of food items, not only with reference to their nutritional importance, but also with reference to their symbolic significance. Food items are not only 'food for the body', they are also 'food for thought' about our relations to 'others' in the world of living people, as well as about our relations to cosmological forces. I will here explore how such symbolic uses of food and food related items (pots, ovens, hearths etc.) are embedded in material forms.

Jack Goody emphasised already in 1982 that there is a set of close and extensive relations between food on the one hand and cosmological and ideological beliefs on the other hand. During the last decade several scholars have discussed the link between food and ideology (Counihan & van Esterik 1997; Miracle & Milner 2002; Sherratt 1999; Skoglund 1999; van der Veen 2003). To get an understanding of the maintenance of these two different types

of foodways over such a long time period, this perspective might stimulate us to explore further aspects of the archaeological material than techno-causal relations. I will in this paper concentrate on the foodways of Africa; however I will to some extent contrast it with those of the Near East.

Origin of pottery production in Africa

Angela E. Close (1995) has made a survey of the earliest sites with remains of ceramics in North Africa. Her general conclusion is that pottery was invented somewhere along the southern edge of the Sahara, and that it spread very quickly east-west across a 3000 km belt of the continent. The distribution of the earliest ceramic-bearing sites in North Africa (Fig. 1) does not, according to Close, spread to the Mediterranean part of North Africa or east of the river Nile (Close 1995). Close emphasises that early pottery always seems to occur in association with grinders as well as in association with exploitation of aquatic resources. The ceramics found on these sites belong to the so-called Early Khartoum tradition, with an emphasis on dotted wavy-line decoration and open-mouthed globular shaped pots (Fig. 3). These early dates of pottery from different areas suggest that pottery was independently invented in Africa, probably as early as 10,000 b.p. Most of the finds are from the Sahara, a region which did not open up for this type of resource exploitation until the Early Holocene humid phase in the beginning of the tenth millennium b.p. (Hassan 1986). The area, which today is a desert, would at that time have consisted of a dry savannah type of vegetation in most areas, generally what we today think of as typical for the Sahelian zone of Sub-Saharan Africa, further south.

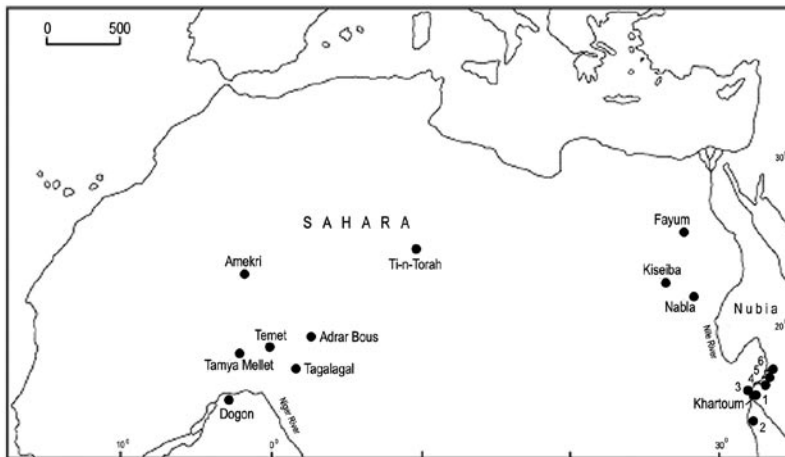


Figure 1. Sites with early pottery from Africa, dated to the 10th to the 9th millennium b.p.

John Sutton (1974:77) has argued that the first ceramic vessels in Africa were part of a parcel of a soup, porridge, and fish stew revolution. He hypothesised a possible relationship between the emergence of aquatic resource utilisation and the invention of pottery technology. The importance of aquatic resources for the emergence of pottery seems to be documented from other areas: the Jomon pottery in Japan dated to 12,000 b.p. (Rowley-Conwy 1984), and shell middens in the Brazilian Amazonas dated to 8000 b.p. (Roosevelt *et al.* 1991). Ertebølle from

Denmark is also an example of pottery used in a context of heavy reliance of aquatic resources (Andersen & Johansen 1986). In the last case, the use of ceramics was adopted from nearby farmers, while the first two are examples of innovation of pottery taking place in a context of predominantly aquatic resource utilization, but with some exploitation of grains. In this article, I will not discuss the role of aquatic resources in the innovation of pottery, since the aim of this article is to focus on long-term utilization of cereals. However, I want to draw the attention to the occurrence of very early use of pottery and the exploitation of aquatic resources, which we can also see in the Russian Far East, along the Japanese Sea (paper presented by Nina Kononenko at the 5th World Archaeology Congress in Washington, June 2003).

Consequences of pottery making

The adaptive importance of pottery lies in its allowing for the utilisation of a broader and wider range of food resources. Handwerker has argued that pottery and the use of boiled food led to a change in the diet of infants, allowing an early weaning, which would influence and increase the fertility of women and affect the survival rate of infants since the period after weaning is critical (Handwerker 1983:19).

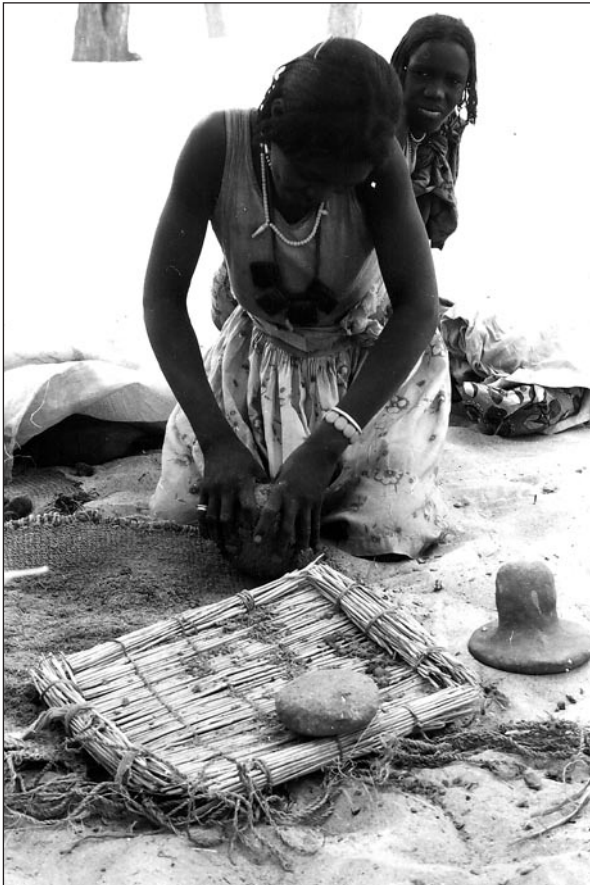


Figure 2. A potter from the village of Jidad, Darfur, Sudan, is mixing temper with clay and kneading it into a clay ball. This is the first step before starting to make the pot. Photo: Randi Haaland.

Ethnographic material and archaeological evidence make it reasonable to assume that it was within the female sector of activities that the important innovation of applying fire in order to transform clay jars for storage to clay pots for cooking took place. This hypothesis has been forcefully argued by Rita P. Wright, who, on the basis of the work done by Ruth Amiran (1965), pairs the making /cooking of bread/porridge with pottery production (Wright 1991). Pottery making and food preparation by cooking involve activities which, in many respects, are similar: grinding, the use of water, kneading, and firing (Fig. 2). Wright argues further that “from its earliest appearance it very likely involved women’s labour and its development occurred hand in hand with other economic activities such as the domestication process” (Wright 1991:214).

With the advantages of pottery as discussed above, it is even more of a puzzle that pottery was not adopted in the Near East at the beginning of cereal cultivation.

However, looking at the early pottery material from these two regions, the evidence does suggest a real gap in time and place. The distribution of the early pottery material in Sub-Saharan Africa does not seem to have spread east of the Nile. The earliest pottery in the Near East is found in a belt stretching from Turkey to Syria to Iraq and Iran, while it seems to occur several centuries later in the southern Levant. Does this mean that ceramics was invented independently in Africa and the Near East, or did it diffuse from Africa eastward? I shall not engage in this discussion of independent innovation versus diffusion but rather look at pottery in relation to the two different foodways characteristic of Africa and the Levant - one based on cooking and the other on baking. With the emphasis on bread that we see from the earliest period in the Near East, there was not the same need to use pottery as containers for cooking as there was for making porridge in Africa. Thus, I think that here we can see the emergence of these two different foodways which included the complex of food items, preparation technologies, and associated symbolism at this early stage.

Pottery and agriculture in the Sudanese Nile Valley

To illustrate how the typical African food system based on porridge emerged I will draw on the material that our team excavated in Central Sudan in the 1980s. Several sites in the eastern and central Sahara, as well as in the Sudanese Nile Valley, have yielded macro remains of sorghum, dated to the period between 8000 and 4000 b.p. (Magid 1989, 1995; Wasylikowa *et al.* 1997). There is an extensive discussion on the sorghum cultivation however, up to now all macro remains from this period are morphologically wild. The oldest remains of domesticated sorghum come from the sites Jebel Tomat, Meroe and Qasr Ibrim (Clark & Stemler 1975; Stemler & Falk 1981; Rowley-Conwy 1991; Rowley-Conwy *et al.* 1997).

I will here present material from sites which show the long history of utilization of wild grains: Abu Darbein, El Damer, and Aneibis (Haaland 1995, 1999; Magid 1995). The pottery found is similar to the Early Khartoum/dotted wavy line tradition that I discussed earlier (Fig. 3). These sites are dated to the 9th and 8th millennium b.p. The large number of pot sherds that we recovered from these sites appears in a food-gathering context, where a broad range of resources were utilised. The most dominant were aquatic-fish resources, however, plant food such as wild sorghum was utilised, and some grindstones were also recovered. The ceramics consist of large pots (Fig. 4) probably used for storing and of smaller pots (Fig. 5) which could have been used for cooking or possibly serving. Beer may already have been in use at this



Figure 3. Ceramic sherd with dotted wavy line type of decoration from Aneibis site, Sudan. Photo: Ann-Mari Olsen.



Figure 4. Large open bowl decorated with impressed dotted wavy line type of design. The diameter is estimated to have been c. 70 cm, probably used for storing of food or brewing of beer, from El Damer site, Sudan. Photo: Ann-Mari Olsen.

early period. I will discuss this in more detail later. This ceramic tradition was maintained for several thousand years to the 6th millennium b.p., with some changes in surface treatment and decoration. It was probably during this time that people in the Khartoum area started to cultivate the local wild sorghum (Haaland 1987, 1995, 1999). This was the beginning of a long history and a remarkable diversity in different forms of sorghum based foodstuffs, porridge, and beer (Edwards 2003). Further discussion on this will be taken up later.

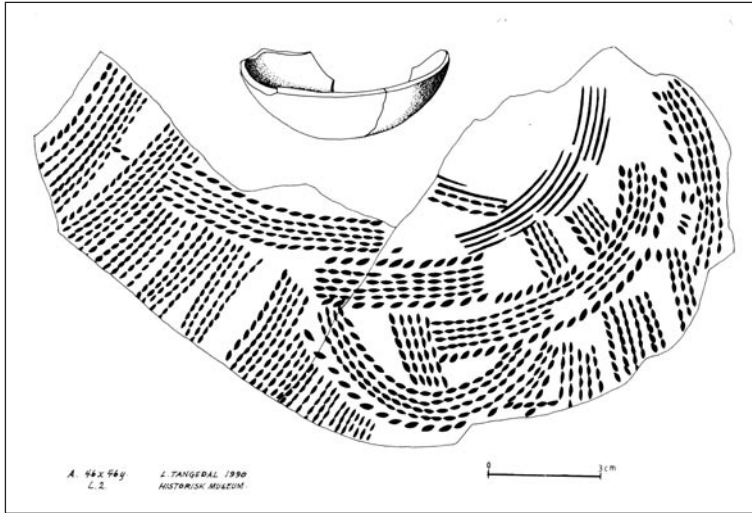


Figure 5. Small pot probably used for serving or drinking, from El Damer site, Sudan. Drawing: Lars Tangedal.

I have earlier argued that the archaeological material during this so-called Khartoum Neolithic period indicates that cultivation of morphologically wild sorghum was practised, plant imprints on pottery show morphologically wild sorghum (Stemler 1990). This was the cultivation of the summer growing African cereal. However, the arguments that the inhabitants were cultivating sorghum are also based on high amounts of grinders (on one site 30,000 fragments were recovered from 140 sq. metres) and large sites (from 10 to 30,000 sq. metres) suggesting a sedentary lifestyle (Haaland 1995). However, the paleo-botanical evidence suggests that the evolution from cultivated to domesticated sorghum took several millennia and did not occur before the end of the 3rd millennium b.p. The earliest evidence for domesticated sorghum occur at Jebel Tomat, Qasr Ibrim and Meroe, all dated to the Meroitic period around the birth of Christ (Clark & Stemler 1975; Rowley-Conwy 1991; Rowley-Conwy *et al.* 1997; Stemler 1990; Stemler & Falck 1981). It has been brought to my attention quite recently that sorghum with features that suggest a more advanced race of cultivated sorghum (caudatum or possibly durra) has been recovered from Middle Nubia, Kawa, dated to 2450 b.p. (Fuller 2004). This lends support to my hypothesis that cultivation of sorghum goes quite far back in time. I also find it highly unlikely that during the Meroitic time, with a complex civilisation, people were not practising cultivation but relied on wild plants. Furthermore, the evidence that shows that domesticated African *Sorghum (bicolor)* was present in the Indian sub-continent in the third millennium b.p. (Fuller 2003), provides strong support for an earlier phase of African cultivation.

However, the delayed domestication can be seen as related to two factors:

- 1) The harvesting technique used is sweeping or stripping the grain off the stalk; it would not lead to cereal domestication (the lack of tools used as sickles suggests that this way of harvesting could have been practised). These processes affect the plant population no differently than the natural processes.
- 2) Another factor stressed by Magid (1989) is that human-induced isolation outside the natural habitat of wild sorghum was an important factor causing domestication. This

reduced the possibility of inter-breeding between cultivated species and closely related wild species. Back-crossing between these within the natural habitat would prevent domesticated forms from emerging.

Katharina Neumann (2003) does not agree with the perspectives presented above, she maintains that cultivation of sorghum occurred late. She is critical to the importance of out-crossing being a factor delaying the domestication process. She furthermore argues that pastoralism emerged much earlier than cultivation, and she relates this to a high degree of mobility which she sees as necessary to exploit the savannah resources which were unequally distributed in space and time. A further reason was Africa's special development of pastoralism which occurred much earlier than plant cultivation in the Sahara (Neumann 2003). She sees mobility as a precondition for the optimum utilisation of the savannah environment since the edible plants are unequally distributed in space and time, as does Fiona Marshall and Elisabeth Hildebrand (2002). However, my argument is that we have large sedentary sites based on a broad spectrum of resources, especially aquatic ones, dated between 9-6000 b.p. It is within this context that we find material indicating cultivation dated to the 6th millennium b.p. It was the heavy reliance on abundant fish resources which permitted a sedentary way of life. The population build-up in bigger and more sedentary communities along the Nile would have increased the pressure on plant resources which became scarcer. To be able to maintain the plant diet the inhabitants adopted new activities in the exploitation of plants; activities including cultivation, which in the long run led to domestic plants (for further arguments see Haaland 1987:201-202, 1995). I thus see the Nile valley with the remains of large sedentary sites as quite different from the savannah region. We find the earliest evidence for domesticated cattle and sheep/goat in Sub-Saharan Africa at these types of sites along the Nile valley. I have argued (1992) that these domestic animals were only exploited for the primary products. Specialized pastoralism, with a high degree of mobility and the use of secondary products like milk and blood, appears to have become important in the late 6th millennium b.p. (Haaland 1992; Sadr 1991).

I suspect that it was during this time, ca. 6000 b.p. or even earlier, as suggested above, that the typical African food system based on porridge and beer emerged (Haaland *in press*). I have in my earlier work focused more on the production system than the type of food made. Although I have taken it more or less for granted that the main consumption items would have been porridge; grains used to prepare cooked and fermented foodstuffs, which were to become the staple of much of Sub-Saharan Africa, may be traced back to the early use of pottery (Edwards 2004:35).

Life history of pots

The innovation of ceramics going back 10,000 years was fundamental for the development of the African foodways. Cultural regulations of preparation of food, in what type of utensils, where and by whom, are important aspects in most societies. It would have been a crucial cultural change when one started to prepare food in pots. In the pottery container food was transformed from a natural to a cultural product. Eating food is clearly a bodily experience. I have already used the term container in describing pots; the pot is, however, in most cultures not only looked upon as a container but as a symbol of the body. The metaphorical association of pots and bodies is apparent in the way we as archaeologists classify pots by using bodily traits as diagnostic - we use words from the human body; mouth, neck, shoulder, and body.

Several ethnographic studies of pottery-making show the same bodily terms used in the local vocabularies (David *et als.* 1988; Haaland 1997). There seems to be a special relation between pottery and human bodily experience. Through food, social relations between people can be expressed. Not only is eating food a bodily experience loaded with symbolism, but the bodily containers - the pot in which the food is cooked and served is also charged with meaning.

In an excellent book, *Food, the body and the self* (1996), Deborah Lupton argues that food itself is coded feminine, there is a strong association across cultures of women with food preparation, and women produce food with their own bodies during pregnancy and lactation. She sees a symbolic cohesion between women's body and food; it is the women who transform food from a natural to a cultural product, and the pot is crucial in this transformation. Paul Atkinson also sees food as a liminal substance that stands as a bridging substance between nature and culture, the human and the natural, the outside and the inside (quoted in Lupton 1996:17). A fundamental aspect of being a woman is constituted by her role as a nurturer. If one looks upon the body as a container and the pot as a container, a metaphoric association between female bodies and pots is close to hand.

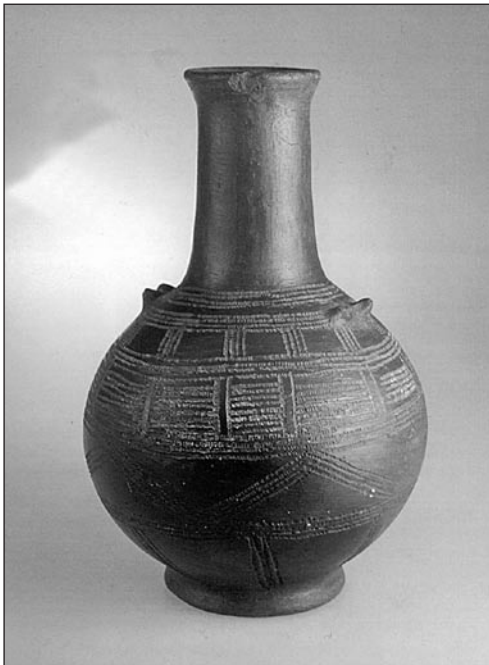


Figure 6. Pot from the Wollaita tribe in Ethiopia, decorated with features symbolising breasts. Photo: Svein Skare.

Eugenia W. Herbert (1993:211) has pointed out that pot decoration often uses scarifications and features which illustrate the social identity of the pot as if it were a person. For pottery, socially and culturally constructed markers may be just as important as anatomical ones (*ibid*:213). The pot can have a gender and an age conveyed by its type and what it is used for (Fig. 6). In cultures where human bodies are decorated and which see pots as human bodies one would not think of leaving pots unscarified any more than the human body would remain blank (*ibid*:211), and it is the pot that frequently accompanies a person from birth to grave. Ethnographic material shows ritual breaking of pots in and on the grave often to be

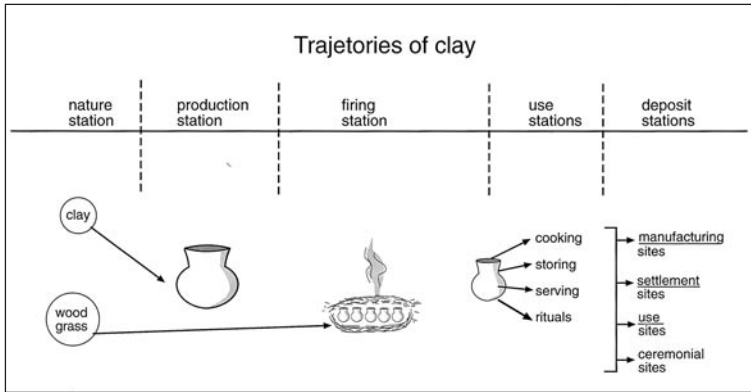


Figure 7. Trajectories of clay. Drawing: Ellinor Hoff

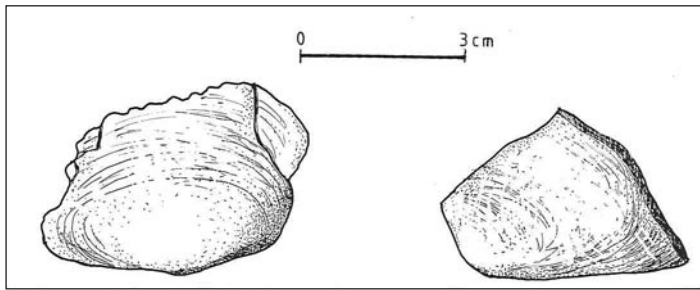


Figure 8. Shells with a serrated edge and cut edges, probably used as potter's tools, from El Damer, Sudan. Drawing: Ellinor Hoff.

used to symbolise death (Barley 1994:108). Pots are thus seen as symbolising people in many societies, and the human body is often used as a metaphor for the societal body (i.e. society) (David *et als.* 1988).

My perspective here is to relate pottery to lived human experience and try to get an understanding of the social aspects of pots. I will use Arjun Appadurai's ideas of the social life of things (1986). " – it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context" (Appadurai 1986:5). I shall focus on pottery and its motion from raw natural clay through various stages of extraction, manufacturing, use, and deposits. In the diagram (Fig. 7), I have tried to illustrate important "stations" on the trajectories of pottery from their occurrence as clay in nature; to the production station where the pots are shaped, to the firing station where clay is transformed through firing of pots, to the use stations where the pots are used for specific purposes, and finally to the place where the pots were deposited. This is the place where we as archaeologists recover most of the material.

Again I will refer to the material our team excavated in Central Sudan. The material indicates that clay used for manufacturing the pots was taken locally from the riverbank by the sites. The clay used has been identified as the same as the one found locally. The manufacturing station, i.e. production of pots, took place at the habitation sites. Here we also find mica which was used as temper and the tools used to decorate the pots, such as shells with serrated edges (Fig. 8). We have not found the firing station. This would most likely have been a



Figure 9. A woman is firing the pots in a simple depression. From the village of Jidad, Darfur, Sudan. Photo: Randi Haaland.

simple depression (Fig. 9), which is what we find ethnographically with this type of simple pottery technology (Haaland 1978). The use stations refer to the different functions of the pots: cooking, storing, serving, and rituals; it appears that we have evidence of all these various functions taking place at the settlement sites. We find pots for storing (Fig. 3) and for serving (Fig. 4), while most of the pots seem to have been used for cooking. Ritual evidence is seen in the use of pots in burials. Graves are found within the settlement debris, the explicit use of these as grave goods are thus difficult to ascertain, however, comparative material from sites of the same cultural tradition shows that broken but quite complete pots were buried beneath the head of skeletons. The excavator believed the pot could have been used as a “pillow” (Arkell 1949). The pattern that we can see present during the 8th millennium b.p. continues to the 6th millennium b.p. From the Khartoum Neolithic we observe over time the emergence of an increased variety of pottery types. We see a variety of small vessels, such as cups, which could be related to the serving of liquid foods and drink. This is probably also related to an increased social differentiation where drinking was part of social display (Krzyzaniak 2004).

This is the beginning of the long history of the rich and diversified use of pottery in Africa. They constitute everyday social life and define relationship and events.

Ethnographic cases of food symbolism in Africa.

In Africa the staple food is primarily porridge and beer made from sorghum and millet. The fundamental importance of food as a medium for initiating and maintaining social relations is well recognized in both anthropological and archaeological literature (Appadurai 1981; Douglas 1984; Harris & Ross 1987; Gosden & Hather 1999; Dietler & Hayden 2001). However, beer characteristically binds people together and serves to reinforce social hospitality during ceremonies and communality in ritual and everyday life (Fig. 10).

An example of how beer and porridge are woven into a comprehensive set of symbolic associations is provided by Gunnar Haaland’s material from the Fur of Western Sudan



Figure 10. A beer party among the Busoga in Uganda.
Photo: Margaret Kyakuwa.

(Haaland 1998). Objectively, beer and porridge are related to two other items: grain and female labour. They are also related in Fur thinking in the sense that their various uses communicate important concerns among the Fur. Most importantly, they are closely identified with the domestic sphere – for the wife to sell either of them would be considered an act falling in the same category as her selling sex, i.e. these items symbolically express the importance of the solidarity of the family. The symbolic identification of female identity with sorghum products is also manifested in Fur terminology describing beer pots. Such pots may be referred to as mother (*eja*) and are sometimes decorated with two protuberances called breasts (*nansu*).

An illustrating example of practical and symbolic uses of cereal food is provided by Ivan Karp's study of the Iteso of Kenya where beer is both a food (an alcoholic nourishing gruel) and a ritual substance (Karp 1980). Beer drinking is a daily activity for most people and is a pervasive feature of social life. The Iteso use the beer party to organise work groups, and the willingness to participate in reciprocal beer drinking is a fundamental part of the definition of the social person. It is part of life cycle rituals such as complex mortuary ceremonies and rituals connected with birth. Consumption of beer generally takes place among a group of people sitting round a big pot and sipping beer through a straw. Similar ways of consumption are widespread in East Africa, like among the Busoga of Uganda (Fig. 10). Joint consumption of beer symbolically expresses and fosters communal solidarity. There is furthermore a close

association of beer with mother's milk. This is manifested in rituals performed after the birth of a child.

By these examples I want to draw attention to a familiar theme in African ethnography, namely that the two food items porridge and beer, and the items and activities involved in their preparation, serve as important sources for symbolic elaboration in a wide range of African communities.

Agriculture and food preparation in the Near East.

Material evidence from the Near East suggests that the production and consumption of cereal was quite different from the African system. During the first period of cultivation of winter growing cereal, no pottery remains are found. This is within the so-called Pre Pottery Neolithic period: 10,300–8000 b.p. PPNA: 10,300-9600 b.p. and PPNB: 9600-8000 b.p. PPNB is divided into three sub-phases: Early PPNB: 9600-9300 b.p., Middle PPNB: 9300-8500 b.p. and Late PPNB: 8500-8000 b.p. (Kujit & Goring-Morris 2002).

The tools for food preparation are very numerous on most settlement sites, consisting of a wide variety of ground stone tools; the cereal that people cultivated was obviously made into flour. The problem is what kind of food people prepared from this flour when they did not use pottery. They did not use ovens to bake the bread either, these do not occur until more than a thousand years later during the PPNB period.

It has also been suggested that bread was baked on an open hearth, what is called ash baked bread. Evidence for bread baked in ovens is not found until the Middle PPNB period after 9000 b.p., when finds of ovens seem to occur rather frequently and appear to be part of the domestic arrangement. One site is the PPNB Tell Sabi Abayad II in Syria, where excavations revealed several circular bread ovens in the courtyard surrounded by square rooms. The ovens are classified as tannours (Akkermans & Schwartz 2002:64). These ancient ovens resemble the modern tannour, which is widespread in the Near East and parts of North Africa. To sum up: the tradition of baking bread in the oven does not appear to be a technique used before the PPNB, while the tradition of making bread/cakes in the hearth seem to have preceded the use of oven for more than a thousand years. With the emphasis on bread that we see from the earliest period, there was not the same need to use pottery as containers for cooking as there was for porridge making in Africa.

Hearth and house in the Middle East

During the time when ovens seem to become quite numerous one can also see important changes taking place in the domestic arrangements, such as the shape of the buildings: from round houses to houses with multiple square rooms, and with more emphasis on storage facilities, either as separate rooms or as special buildings. Very striking changes are seen in the decoration of the houses and rooms. There is elaborate use of plaster floors, described as lime plaster, which are often highly burnished. The heat temperature required to make lime plaster is 7-800 degrees Celsius (Gourdin & Kingery 1975), so they obviously had the technology to make ceramics. They did not! Special care seems to have been taken when making the hearths. They were often surrounded by a rim made of clay and stones, or special decorations as one can see at such sites as Ain Ghazal and Jericho (Kujit & Goring-Morris 2002). The emphasis in the Near East was not on pots like in Africa, but on the hearth, the oven, and the house. This is apparent in the richly decorated houses that we find (Hodder 1990).

Cereal and beer

I have up to now focused on bread, but below I will address beer as a food item, which is and was important in the diet not only in the Near East but also, as we discussed earlier, in Africa. It has been suggested that the first cultivated cereals were used for making beer (Katz & Voigt 1986). There are several advantages to the production and consumption of fermented food other than nutrition.

Solomon H. Katz and M.M. Voigt have a detailed discussion on the steps involved in the preparation of beer. Crucial here is to understand how the process of fermentation could have started since this usually requires containers for heating. This was during the pre-pottery period, thus long before the use of pottery. However, they do not see this as a problem since the daily temperatures in the Near East can reach 40 degrees Celsius or more, there would thus have been little need to heat the brew. They suggest that the use of beer could go back to the early phase of manipulation of grain, i.e., to the Natufian period. The importance of beer is very well documented from later periods, especially dynastic time.

Textual and ethnographic cases of food symbolism in the Near East.

There are also plenty of iconographic evidence and religious texts that show the importance of bread, how these food items are used as 'food for thought' expressing important ideas about human and cosmological relations. This comes across very strongly in the Bible where the sharing of bread is used as a metaphor for the unity of those who partake in eating it, as we see in the Last supper:

"And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed it and brake it, and gave it to the disciples, and said. Take, eat; this is my body" (Matt: 26:26).

I will also refer to some ethnographic studies which show the significance of bread and the rich symbolism surrounding it. Carol Delaney describes in her 1991 book about Turkey how bread represents the major part of most people's diet, and bread is the generic name for food. Villagers do not ask if one wants something to eat but if one wants bread. Symbolically, bread making is looked upon as analogous to the process of procreation. The rising of the dough is a mysterious and creative process similar to pregnancy.

The earliest textual evidence of beer consumption is dated to 4000 BCE (Katz & Voigt 1986:31; Joffe 1998). Beer features prominently in many later Sumerian and Mesopotamian texts 2600-2350 BCE. Some texts include a song celebrating the Sumerian beer house and the beer goddess Ninkasi, to whom a hymn was written. In the third and second millennia one sometimes encounters beer as a general metaphor for drinks (Katz & Voigt 1986). In general, beer appears to have been an important food item that was integrated into the mythology, religion, and economy of the Sumerians (Katz & Voigt 1986).

Egypt and the Horn, crossroads

As I have stated earlier, there does not seem to be any contact between the Levant and the Nile valley during the PPN. The links were between the northern Levant and Anatolia. It was probably during the early Pottery Neolithic, during the 8th millennium b.p., that the contacts between the Nile Valley and the Levant were initiated, involving the diffusion of a package of domesticated plants and animals. During this period, pottery material recovered

from Nabta Playa dated to 7000 b.p. is different from the earlier pottery, which was of the Early Khartoum/dotted wavy line tradition (Wendorf & Schild 1998, 2002). The excavators assume this new pottery to have been introduced with domesticates from the Near East. With the contact now established between Egypt and the Levant, winter growing cereals, emmer wheat, and barley were introduced and became the vital food products in Egypt. These cereals were probably made into bread and beer, and came to be the main staples in the pharaonic diet. Egypt became part of the Near Eastern bread eating world (Edwards 2003), culturally distinct from the region to the south with summer rain where sorghum millet was cultivated, and used for porridge and beer.

Another crossroads was Ethiopia where one has both the African cereal food complex: sorghum, millet, and teff, and the Near Eastern cereals wheat and barley. The tannour oven, however, was not invented, or diffused, to Ethiopia. Instead the griddle was used for making fermented bread. Following Diane Lyons and Catherine D'Andrea (2003), I think it is plausible that the reason for this is that there already existed an alternative food preparation technology that could be used for baking bread, namely the griddle. The griddle had been developed for baking the fermented bread (injera) from the indigenous non-gluten cereal teff. The African indigenous cereals that contained no gluten were made into fermented griddle bread. Other social conditions may also have prevented the bread-baking oven to diffuse to the Highlands of Ethiopia.

Conclusions

We thus have two different food systems, based on porridge and bread, which have implications for these items seen as food and the symbolism surrounding these systems. A review of the beginning of cereal cultivation in the Near East shows the importance of cereal which was made into bread. However, the material has also made us aware of the significance of beer as food in the early food producing societies. It has been suggested that beer in the Near East was made just as early, or even earlier, than bread. In Sub-Saharan Africa, beer might have been used equally early as porridge. I think that in foodways, the complex of food items, preparation technologies, and associated symbolism, we may find qualities creating a kind of “long duree” in Braudel’s sense (1958); and that we can see archaeological and ethnographic differences within the Near Eastern and African regions as variations on two contrasting themes.

Notes

1. All dates used are uncalibrated.

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Summary

Archaeological evidence indicates a striking contrast between the Near East and Africa with regard to two fundamental cultural features generally assumed as interlinked elements of the Neolithic, namely cultivated cereals and the use of pottery. In the Near East the material shows

that domesticated cereals occurred about 2000 years earlier than ceramics, while in Africa the evidence indicates pottery occurred 2000 years before cultivated cereals. My concern is consumption of food items, not only with reference to their nutritional importance, but also with reference to their symbolic significance. Food items are not only 'food for the body' they are also 'food for thought' about our relations to 'others' in the world of living people, as well as about our relations to cosmological forces. I will here explore how such symbolic uses of food and food related items (pots, ovens, hearths etc.) are embedded in material forms.

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