

## **Food, Gender, and Power: An Ethnographic Study of Lak Nomads of Lorestan Province**

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### **Extended Abstract**

#### **1. Introduction**

Food and nutrition, whether before or after consumption, play a role of utmost importance in forming and maintaining cultural characteristics of humans. Economic, cultural, and social factors and conditions could affect the access and control of food products as well as meeting various tastes in this regard. Similar to signs, food and the manner of its consumption could reflect cultural implications about humans. Alongside the aforementioned components, gender and power are also considered social factors which influence populations' foodways, i.e. the types of production, distribution, and consumption of food products. Food and the manner of consumption demonstrate one's economic and cultural capitals; albeit they are also linked to the human physique along with cultural significance and implications on another level. As a sociocultural consideration of the human physique, gender is represented within the food system in various ways, exploiting food related capacities to show a cultural reflection of genders in such depictions. As a result, food alongside its significance and implications are constantly present and influential in the modern cultural world. As a general description, the present study seeks to provide answers to the following main questions with focus on the notions of power and gender involved within the food system: first, how do various

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components of power and gender influence the role of nomadic men and women, regarding the local food system of Lak nomads who live in Lorestan province, Iran, in various stages of food production, provision, and consumption? And second, what are the differences and diversities between men and women's power with respect to controlling, providing, and consuming food products?

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

Food and human nutrition have always been the focus of anthropologists. Within an evolutionist approach framework, Lewis Henry Morgan pointed out that the history of the evolution of human societies could be identified from the early phases to late stages, according to the techniques used for gaining access to food resource. In fact, humans' skills in gaining access to food as well as their ability to control food resources and processing them has resulted in the distinction and superiority of human beings over other animals. A symbolic approach to food could be traced within humans' cultural lifetime and the beliefs of pioneering anthropologists. In this regard, James Frazer could be mentioned in particular, who narrates the symbolic applications of food and its resources in different aspects of human life among diverse nations, cultures, and societies. The difference in food-related preferences and tastes in all dimension, formed through the habitus of various classes and strata, is regarded by Pierre Bourdieu as a means for identifying distinctions as well as the reproduction of hierarchies and differences. At a macro level, food could also be a sign of power or weakness of various social strata. In his book, Bourdieu points out that similar to their tastes in music, arts, and clothing, the wealthy exploit food to assert distinction from lower strata. Such an influence of food is reminded by Mainz as sweetness and power through his works. These approaches are used in the present study as a set of inspiring, sensitizing ideas and beliefs, so as to provide a closer understanding of the subject at hand.

## **3. Method**

Obtaining answers and a clear image of posed questions require a long, profound exploration of the culture being studied. Since ethnography seeks to understand intended phenomena through the perspective of those who are closely related to the subject, it is used in this study as the appropriate method for discerning the significance and implications that bring about gender and its interpretations among nomads. The research strategy of ethnography is used as a means to understand the significance and living environment through the views of actors who gain access to the living experiences of nomads and obtain the intended meanings. For data collection, ethnographic interviews and a participatory observation of employed techniques are required. As James Spradley had intended, the ethnography in this study is used as a process involving endless cycles of reviewing and dealing with

new questions that introduce tremendous dynamism and flexibility to ethnography, in line with collecting massive data so as to reach a thorough understanding of the subject at hand.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

Findings show that in the studied society, food involves numerous symbolic and sociocultural levels and applications. In this society, food is considered as a component in which countless implications are present in various dimensions of the society's sociocultural life. Gender is a significant component in food production, distribution, and consumption, which has brought about a different form of power to women regarding access and consumption of food products. Being close to food products and resources is an important symbol for women. Additionally, the food system is an important element for demonstrating gender-related features of a culture during the stages of production, distribution, and consumption. In case of the society studied in this inquiry, women and their extent of influence in family are expressed majorly through the extent of power and authority over the management of food resources, which could be bestowed upon their relatives (esp. female members) by women as a gift. Men employ the strategy of arranging parties and catering in order to obtain influence, power, and social status. Food is used by both men and women in various ways to gain access to a social base, friendly relationships, and power.

#### 5. Conclusion

Food is an effective means to build distinctive identities for men and women. Such distinct, gender-related identities have offered different levels of access and relations for men and women with respect to food. In a nomadic society, the empowerment of gender-related norms could be seen in daily interactions involving the food system; norms that, the majority of times, are reflective of biological differences and their implications. The impact of gender and its implications can always be seen on how men and women are present in such a food system along with the extent of their powers.

**Keywords:** Food System, Gender, Femininity and Masculinity, Power, Lak Nomads

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