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Excerpt
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Before the Feast

INITIAL CONSIDERATIONS

> *At the heart of science is an essential balance between two seemingly contradictory attitudes – an openness to new ideas, no matter how bizarre or counterintuitive, and the most ruthlessly skeptical scrutiny of* all *ideas, old and new.*
>
> – Carl Sagan, *The Demon Haunted World*

WHY STUDY FEASTS?

"Feasts." The word conjures up images of sybaritic self-indulgence or luxurious, lavish opulence and frivolity. In Industrial cultures, feasts are generally fun events that satiate our gustatory and social senses. They seem to have little practical benefit. They provide experiences outside our work and the drudgery of daily responsibilities (Figure 1.1). Feasts have undoubtedly always had such appeal. However, what you will discover in this book is that feasting in pre-Industrial societies had, and still has, far-reaching consequences in many other domains (Figure 1.2). In fact, up until the Industrial Revolution, there may have been no other more powerful engine of cultural change than feasts.

This book provides an initial synthesis of what archaeologists, ethnoarchaeologists, ethnographers, and historians know about the dynamics of feasting in pre-Industrial societies. Although ethnographers and historians have a long tradition of documenting feasts, sometimes in minute detail, they have not always been very diligent in probing the inner dynamics and benefits that are associated with feasts or in examining feasts from broader theoretical perspectives. Early colonial government administrators and missionaries were generally baffled by the enormous quantities of food and valuable gifts that seemed to be squandered at large tribal feasts. This behavior seemed antithetical to economic progress and particularly to company profits or government revenues. Governments often reacted by outlawing traditional

1.1. Although the term "feast" may conjure images of modern dinner parties and receptions like this one, in reality, feasts in traditional societies were quite different. (Photograph courtesy of Arlene Hayden).

1.2. Traditional feasts, such as this installation ceremony for a new village chief on the Polynesian island of Futuna, featured key individuals in the community or region and were quite formal affairs at which social relationships were consolidated and political debts were brokered. (Photograph by B. Hayden).

feasts like the potlatch of the Northwest Coast of North America and the major feasts in Indonesia and Vietnam. Classical archaeologists, profiting from a number of written accounts of opulent feasts, have a tradition of interest in the topic, especially the role of feasts in early Greek politics. Prehistorians, on the other hand, until the last twenty years, seem to have viewed prehistoric feasting as largely irrelevant to the more important issues of subsistence, trade, warfare, technology, and architecture (Hayden and Villeneuve 2011b).

In the 1980s and especially the 1990s, a number of key publications attempted to link pre-Industrial feasting with theoretically important issues in archaeology such as political complexity, social structure, inequality, domestication, the development of prestige technologies, and the creation of monumental architecture (Friedman and Rowlands 1977; Bender 1985; Dietler 1990; Hayden 1990). These theoretical connections provided a springboard for a vigorous new interest in traditional feasting behavior. One of the first results of this new interest was a mini-conference that I proposed to organize with Michael Dietler on theoretical aspects of feasting. Although our initial proposals for a workshop-style event were not supported by foundations that we approached, we did organize a symposium at the 1998 annual meeting of the Society for American Archaeology in Seattle. Since the publication of that symposium (Dietler and Hayden 2001), there has been an exponentially increasing rate of publications on the topic in archaeology around the world, including a number of edited volumes (e.g., Bray 2003a; Wright 2004; Kaulicke and Dillehay 2005; Aranda 2008a; Klarich 2010; Aranda et al. 2011). It is still possible to become familiar with the major publications in this rapidly developing area of research; however, this may not be the case a few years from now. Thus, it may be useful to pause briefly at this juncture in the development of feasting studies and take stock of what we know and how to best orient some future directions in studying feasting, either archaeologically or ethnographically. This is what I hope to achieve to some degree in the following pages.

This book is not meant to be a catalog of various feasting practices throughout the world, as many books on food and even feasting have been in the past. Rather, this book is meant to be a theoretical synthesis (supported by a sample of examples) of what has been learned over the past few decades. My approach is unapologetically comparative because I am interested primarily in understanding recurring patterns in the dynamics of feasts and linkages to other aspects of culture that are important to archaeologists. I will not dwell on the symbolism of foods or items other than to note their relative importance or value and to remark on some of the clearest examples of symbolic importance, as in the case of cattle in Chapter 5. It is the broad issues concerning sociocultural dynamics and change that are my focus.

In terms of prehistoric archaeology, there are a number of important reasons why researchers should pay close attention to any indications of feasting in their excavations and analyses, all of which we will explore in more detail in the following chapters.

- First, feasting constitutes a new kind of human behavior, one that probably first emerged in the Upper Paleolithic in a few favorable locations and only became more widespread in the Mesolithic/Archaic and Neolithic periods.
- Second, feasting is a type of behavior that can leave recognizable and diagnostic material remains in the archaeological record. In fact, their remains are eminently recoverable. Archaeologists just have to look for them.
- Third, feasting appears to be a major strategy used by ambitious individuals to achieve social, economic, and political advantages or dominance.
- Fourth, feasting can thus provide important insights into the social and political structures and dynamics of past societies.
- Fifth, feasting may have been intimately associated with the first specialized structures to appear in the archaeological record, often referred to as communal buildings or ritual structures.
- Sixth, feasting may provide the context, if not the underlying dynamic, for the development of a range of prestige technologies, including new food preparation and serving technologies involving pottery, brewing, the use of metals, record keeping, and calendrical and astronomical systems.
- Seventh, the domestication of plants and animals may be one of the most important prestige technologies to have been developed specifically for feasting contexts.
- And eighth, feasting systems arguably represent an entirely new phenomenon in the biological world in which surplus food can be converted into other desirable things or relationships in short spans of time.

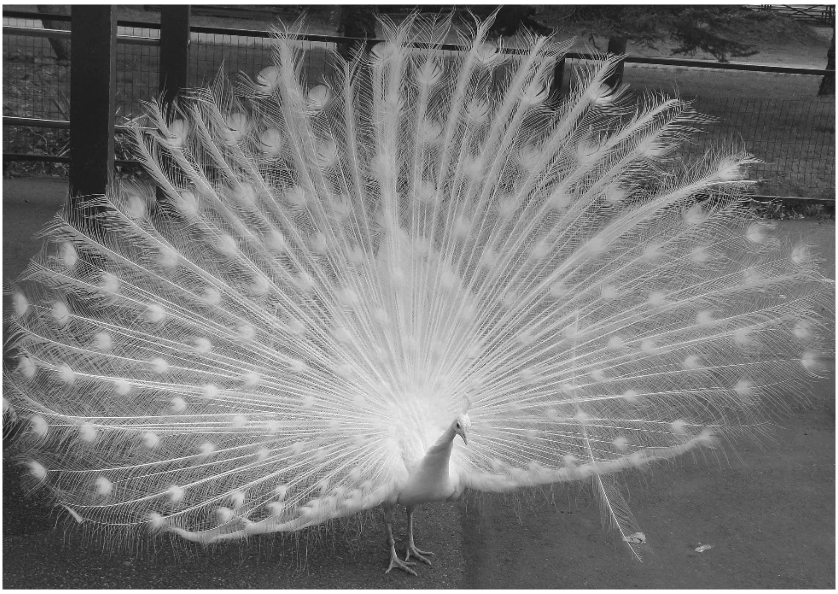
For all these and other reasons (including gender roles, the creation of social identities, and understanding cultural symbols), it is important to study feasting. In addition to its academic relevance, feasting in most traditional societies is often the most valued aspect of cultural life. Participating in feasts elevates people from mundane everyday affairs, it panders to the senses, immerses the individual in social intercourse, animates ritual, and fosters fond memories. Traditional feasts epitomize the etiquette, dress, cuisine, customs, and rituals of village societies that are displayed or activated in few other contexts. The high value emically associated with traditional feasts is an important indication of why academics should deem them worthy of special attention.

This chapter discusses some background definitions, assumptions, and theoretical issues necessary for fully engaging in the discussions in the chapters that follow. This chapter can be viewed as a "primer." One of the most fundamental topics that should be addressed first is the general theoretical orientation of this study, namely paleo-political ecology.

THE PALEO-POLITICAL ECOLOGY PERSPECTIVE

My perspective on feasting is resolutely ecological. However, within the broad scope of the ecological paradigm are many varied subfields and theories. What might be referred to as "classical cultural ecology" has dealt almost exclusively with resource acquisition and how resource characteristics, such as resource density, size, seasonality, search time, processing effort, distance, and other factors, affected people's choice of resources, the strategies used to obtain them, and their influence on human behavior, especially competition, conflict, alliances, and even ritual life (e.g., Rappaport 1968; Suttles 1968; Vayda 1976; Yengoyan 1976; Wiessner 1982; E. Smith and Winterhalder 1992). As in animal ecology, the underlying issues were how energy could be captured, transformed, stored, and used for survival and reproduction. The process by which advantages were gained in these arenas operated via natural (or cultural) selection and adaptation. The production and use of surplus food was not given much consideration in animal ecology except as surpluses that might be stored for dearth periods (e.g., storage of nuts by squirrels or honey by bees) or incorporated via genetic adaptation over many generations in the form of physical displays of superior reproductive potential: the Zahavis's rather famous "handicap" or "show off" principle (1997), as illustrated by peacock tails or stag's antlers (Figure 1.3). Because ecology as a distinctive field first emerged in the

1.3. In biology, energy beyond what is required for basic subsistence is sometimes invested in showy physical features that have genetically evolved to attract mates or deter rivals, as with this peacock's plumage. Humans often do the same thing using material culture to "show off"; however, feasts go far beyond this basic type of adaptation. (Photograph by B. Hayden)



biological sciences, and because animals could not use more energy than they could eat, cultural ecology at first focused almost exclusively on the subsistence economy of human groups and ignored the status, or political, economy.

In more recent years, the study of the cultural use of resources to "show off" has been developed by human behavioral ecologists as "costly signaling theory." In this approach, costly displays are thought to convey signals primarily to competitors or adversaries to indicate the likely outcomes of any physical conflicts and thereby reduce the incidence of debilitating injuries or death (Wiessner 1989:60; Bliege-Bird and Smith 2005; Roscoe 2009). In earlier cultural and animal ecology studies, such costly displays were referred to as *epideictic* displays (Wynne-Edwards 1962:16; Rappaport 1968:195; 1999:83). Feasting in most societies certainly represents costly displays, with a number of different types of signals being transmitted, including the likely outcomes of conflict. However, as we shall see later, there is considerably more involved in feasting than the simple transmission of competitive signals.

In the ethnoarchaeological studies of feasting that I have been involved in, it became apparent that feasting in traditional societies was predicated on the production and use of surplus resources. Without surpluses, feasts would simply be unthinkable. Thus, potlatching on the Northwest Coast took place in times of abundance and increased in scale as wealth increased from the fur trade (Codere 1950). Similarly, in times of starvation, potlatching ceased (Niblack 1890). This aspect is dealt with in more detail in Hayden (1995:22–3; 2001b:247). Wiessner (2002b:234; Wiessner and Tumu 1998) has also shown how both socioeconomic inequality and feasting systems grew substantially in New Guinea as a result of the introduction of the sweet potato and the increased surpluses that this made possible. Feasting systems did not develop or thrive under stress conditions. It also became apparent during my fieldwork that feasts were being used to create debts and weld together political factions within or between communities. Similarly, on the Northwest Coast and Plateau, others have documented a strong relationship between food surpluses and population levels, wealth levels, and political complexity (Donald and Mitchell 1975; Hunn 1991:223–4). The same relationship has been documented in South Africa by Cashdan (1980) and in Polynesia, where Sahlins (1958:248–9) demonstrated a strong link between surplus production, redistributive economies (based on feasting), and inequality.

Equally important was the related use of feasts as a strategy employed by ambitious individuals to promote their own self-interests and to obtain power. Because these aspects fell outside the purview of classical ecology and signaling theory, I decided to refer to my own approach as "political ecology" (Hayden 2001a:27), or more precisely, "paleo-political ecology" because cultural anthropologists use a "political ecology" framework quite differently to study the exploitation of resources by modern-day elites (Wolf 1972; Bryant 1992; L. Anderson 1994;

Kottak 1999; Stott and Sullivan 2001). The goal of paleo-political ecology is to understand why surplus production takes place in traditional communities and especially how surplus resources are used to promote the self-interests of the producers and manipulators of surpluses in small-scale societies. It is, in many ways, similar to Herskovits's (1940:461–5) and Firth's (1959:480) "status economies," and Sahlins's (1972) and Earle's (1977, 1978, 1997) "political economies," as distinct from "subsistence economies."

The marriage of classical ecological concepts with political factors has perhaps been the single most significant development since the incorporation of ecological models in anthropological theory. Of course, in addition to ecological perspectives, there are many other approaches to explaining feasts. Early administrators and missionaries, as well as many ethnographers, viewed lavish feasting as simply part of distinctive cultural traditions that created their own internal logics largely divorced from economic reason or practical benefits. Thus, Rosman and Rubel (1971) argued that the potlatch of the North American Northwest Coast was the outcome of a particular social type of organization. Other anthropologists appealed to feasts as a means of gaining status, essentially a psychological gratification motivation. Others viewed feasts as wealth-leveling activities that the rich were pressured into hosting in exchange for status, thus maintaining egalitarian social structures (Carrasco 1961; Price 1972; Kirkby 1973:31). Communitarian or functionalist advocates view feasting as serving communal goals and promoting social solidarity (e.g., Saitta and Keene 1990; Potter 2000; Potter and Ortman 2004). However, even an astute ethnographer like Malinowski could not understand the rationale of these food exchanges from a functionalist perspective (Weiner 1988:126).

Cognitive, cultural normative, social, and psychological gratification explanations contrast markedly with ecological, political economy, or cultural materialist explanations. In terms of cultural ecological concepts, Rolf Knight was fond of stressing, in graduate seminars at the University of Toronto, that behaviors that are costly, persist over time, and are widespread can be expected to have adaptive benefits. Feasting exhibits all these characteristics in spades. In fact, various feasts often constituted the single most costly events ever hosted by most families or even entire communities in people's lifetimes. Feasting is certainly a widespread, almost universal behavior, and it has persisted for many thousands of years. Thus, feasting meets all of Knight's criteria for an adaptive behavior. However, from the existing firsthand ethnographic accounts, it was not at all clear what adaptive benefits might have been commensurate with the enormous expenditures of time, effort, and resources that typified many feasts. Appeal to enhancing individual status seemed an inadequate motivation for such lavish and costly expenditures. Some classical cultural ecologists like Suttles (1968) and Rappaport (1968) attempted to explain large feasts in terms of redistributing resources under conditions of pronounced local fluctuations or in terms of providing periodic protein consumption for large numbers of people. However, these interpretations have generally been discredited. As Niblack (1890) observed, feasting essentially ceases when food becomes scarce. It cannot have served a redistributive function when it was most needed. Thus, the following chapters focus on other practical, often implicit, benefits underlying the hosting of feasts. Before proceeding to these discussions, it is important to define feasts and set out some basic purposes for hosting them, as well as to establish a useful framework for classifying feasts.

DEFINITIONS

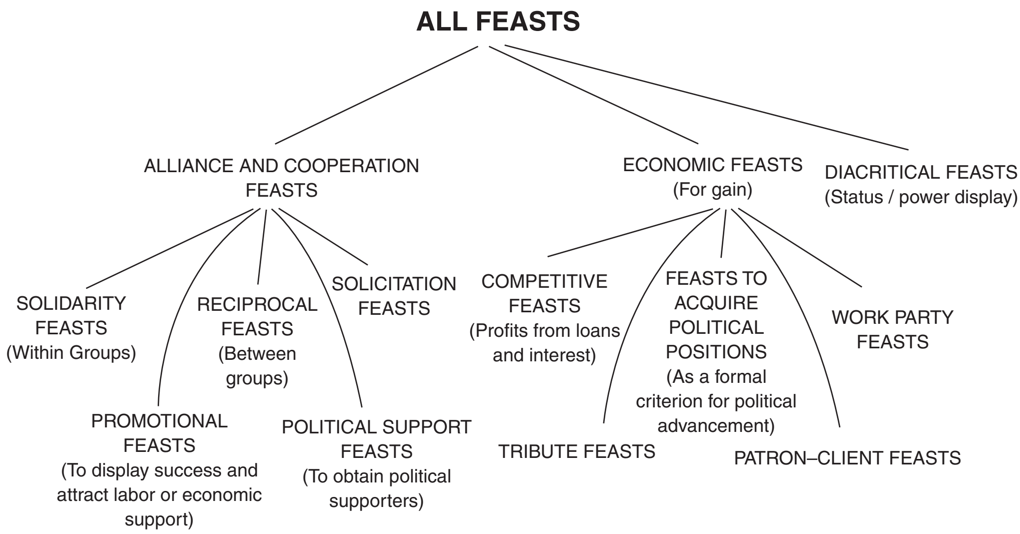
Feasts have been defined in a number of different ways by different authors. One commonly cited definition defines them as "forms of ritual activity that involve the communal consumption of food and drink," also as "public ritual events" (Dietler 2001:65,67,69). I find that there are some problems of vagueness with such a definition. For instance, do meals with one or two other people constitute "communal consumption"? In addition, despite Dietler's disclaimer, for many people, tying consumption to rituals implies that feasting only occurs in religious contexts, which would exclude many events generally viewed as feasting such as political support dinners, birthday parties, work feasts, and dinner parties. Although most of these events include "ritualistic" elements (as opposed to ritual activities), it is not entirely clear what constitutes a "ritual activity" or event, or why such a feature is essential to the definition of feasting. For Dietler, rituals may symbolically differentiate actions or purposes from everyday activities. To me, this use of "ritual" is too general and obscure, especially in relation to its generally understood meaning. Similarly, restricting feasting only to public events seems to exclude private parties and intimate meals. Given these ambiguities, I continue to prefer the definition that I originally proposed: any sharing of a meal including some special foods (i.e., foods not generally served at daily meals) between two or more people hosted for a special purpose or occasion (Hayden 2001a:28). This definition would exclude any communal meal simply held to feed large numbers of people, as in cafeterias. H. Leach (2003:452), Van der Veen (2003:411–2), Stasch (2012:360,371), and Hastorf (2008:1393) have all pointed out that unusual quantities of normal foods may also characterize feasts, especially "potluck" events. The definition of feasts might therefore be amended to read "any sharing between two or more people of a meal featuring some special foods or unusual quantities of foods (i.e., foods or quantities not generally served at daily meals) hosted for a special purpose or occasion."

Definitions proposed by some other authors exclude small-scale social gatherings involving individual households and close relatives from other households or even question the validity of distinguishing daily meals from feasts (Graves and Van Keuren 2004; Twiss 2012:8,23). This is counterproductive in my view. It may be useful to consider nuclear/extended family feasts as distinctive types of events from suprahousehold events; however, there is no rationale for eliminating them completely from analysis using a feasting framework simply because of their smaller size. Such a definition would exclude most of our Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners. This brings up the issue of how feasts can be usefully classified because there is a substantial range of variation in feasting behavior.

CLASSIFYING FEASTS

As with many archaeological phenomena, feasts can be classified in a bewildering variety of ways depending on individual interests, backgrounds, and the theoretical questions being addressed (see Hayden 2001a:35–40). Traditional anthropological descriptions have tended to classify feasts in terms of the emically recognized specific events associated with them: funerals, marriages, births, harvests, house building, and so on. Some analysts have classified feasts according to calendrical or seasonal events (New Year, solstices, harvests) versus life events (birth, marriage, death), to which one could add political events (such as interpolity alliances and village celebrations). Other approaches use the hosting social group (such as lineages, households, or communities) to categorize feasts. Others have examined them in terms of obligatory return feasts of equal or greater value versus nonreturn feasts (Perodie 2001:191). Still others, like Dietler (2001:76–88), emphasize the social relations involved in feasts, such as empowering (entrepreneurial) feasts for the acquisition or manipulation of influence and power, patron-role feasts (for legitimizing or helping to create sociopolitical asymmetries), work feasts (sometimes nonreciprocal labor contracts), and diacritical feasts (to display and reify concepts of ranked differences in the social order, hence events lacking reciprocal hospitality or debts). Many other distinctions can be used for classifying feasts, such as their size or auxiliary features (including, e.g., prestige gifts, dancing, religious rituals, heirloom displays, sport combats, or alcohol). However, there is no "right" classification for feasts (or most other phenomena). There are only more or less useful and insightful classifications – classifications that are better or worse for answering specific questions or dealing with specific issues.

Because my main interest is the relationship between feasts and community dynamics (including sociopolitical structures), I deal with feasts largely in terms of the social groups that host feasts and the types of benefits that they hope to gain from hosting them. I refer to these benefits as the underlying motives or purposes for hosting feasts. Examining feasts from this perspective might be considered a "formal" analysis (what practical benefits derive from feasts and what general forms they take), as opposed to "symbolical" analysis (focusing on the symbolic reasons for hosting events, such as curing or ancestor veneration; see Hayden 2001a:25). Various types of sociopolitical groups will be introduced in the following chapters,



1.4. There are numerous ways that feasts can be categorized. The classification used in this book is represented here and is based on the underlying basic motive for hosting traditional feasts: solidarity within or between social groups, economic gain or advantage, and status or power display. Each basic motive can take a number of specific forms.

from nuclear households, to corporate groups, to bands, to special interest groups and communities. But the dominant purposes of feasts can be grouped under three basic types of benefits with a number of subvarieties, as illustrated in Figure 1.4. These are:

- Social Bonding:
  - Enhancing solidarity and effectiveness of social groups
  - Creating alliances between social groups
  - Bonding for warfare
  - Promoting or advertising group success and the desirability of affiliations
  - Acquiring political support and validating political positions through displays of that support
- Material/Economic Benefits:
  - Undertaking labor-intensive tasks
  - Extracting resources from community members (via tribute feasts, patron-clientships, royal life-event celebrations, touring feasts, harvest celebrations, secret society or temple events, or more subtle means)
  - Using feasts to invest in children or in exchanges
  - Compensating for transgressions or losses
  - Solicitation feasts
  - Investment (greater return) feasts
- Creation of Status Distinctions (diacritical feasts)