The Symbolic Value of Food

An ethnographic study of Gujarati families

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Research methodology and study

- Participant observation with Gujarati families in Harrow and India, Gujarati words used.
- Focus on women and children
- Child-rearing patterns and religious ritual
- Role of women in household
- Pregnancy and breastfeeding
- Food preparation for family and gods
- Protection from malevolent forces

Central value of food

As a mediator of family ties and values, and links with history

Contact with the gods through religious ritual

Positive and negative energies –food, body fluids

Women's bodies as purveyors of purity and danger

Responsibilies for children and newly married couples shown through food shared at life-cycle rituals

A vegetable market in Wembley

Food as a code for social relations

- ‘If food is treated as a code, the messages it encodes will be found in patterns of social relations being expressed. The message is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion, exclusion, boundaries and transactions across boundaries.’
- Douglas M. 1975:249

The Joint Household

- ‘Eating together means we are one’
- Living in one house ‘*ghar*’ is the Hindu ideal- support each other, chores are shared, elderly and children are cared for
- Each house has its own ‘*sanskar*’ (moral values) which ties members to the building as well as the people
- Worship at the family shrine

A Gujarati Lunch

The Purity of Childhood

- Children are in a state of purity
- Rituals required to guard against *najar*-the evil eye, pungent foods and water used
- Black threads and black marks protect body boundaries from *najar*
- Breast milk is white and pure, represented in temple iconography
- Cow's milk is also pure from *Gaimata* (mother goddess) and may be 'safer' than weaning foods

Women, menstruation, childbirth and breastfeeding

- Women are responsible for the spiritual continuity of the household and tend the shrine
- Monthly menstruation and bleeding after childbirth put them in a state of impurity
- Danger to others in house and could spoil food which could make consumers unwell
- Will not enter the kitchen at this time
- Other women will cook special foods for them
- Special foods for breastfeeding

Food used in ritual

- *Puja* (worship) to Ganesh is a precursor to all major rituals and festival. Fieldnotes:
- ‘They wash the figure of Ganesh in honey, milk, yogurt, sugar and ghee and dry him with a yellow cloth. Threads of different colour, sandalwood powder, pink and yellow flowers, dried fruit and cashew nuts are offered and water sprinkled all over’

Worship at the household shrine

Continuity of Gujarati moral values

- Kinship is at once realised and reinforced through sharing food
- Feeding each other demonstrates hierarchy, responsibility, continuity of values
- Offerings to the gods ensure that the family consume the spiritual energies of the gods
- Positive thoughts are transmitted through pregnancy,breast milk, cooked foods

Boys reinforce kinship ties

Emotions pass through body fluids and food

- While pregnant or breastfeeding mother passes her thoughts to baby
- If she thinks good thoughts the child will grow up to be a good person
- Expressed donor milk could be a problem as it contains the thoughts of a stranger
- Older women told me- a child learns his culture through his mother’s milk

Donor breast milk

- Meera said: There was a time when breast milk was so much in fashion, when people were collecting it and putting it in milk banks. Then women started to think, do I want my baby to have milk from another woman, who has a different kind of personaliy, different thought, do I want to use it?

Cooking food which is fresh, nutritious, and free from evil

‘By cooking, food is made to pass from the natural world to the human world, and one might whether there is not here something analogous to the ‘marginal state’ in *rites de passage*, when a person is no longer in one condition nor yet in another, and consequently exposed, open in some way, to evil influences’ Dumont 1980:140

Food for the Gods

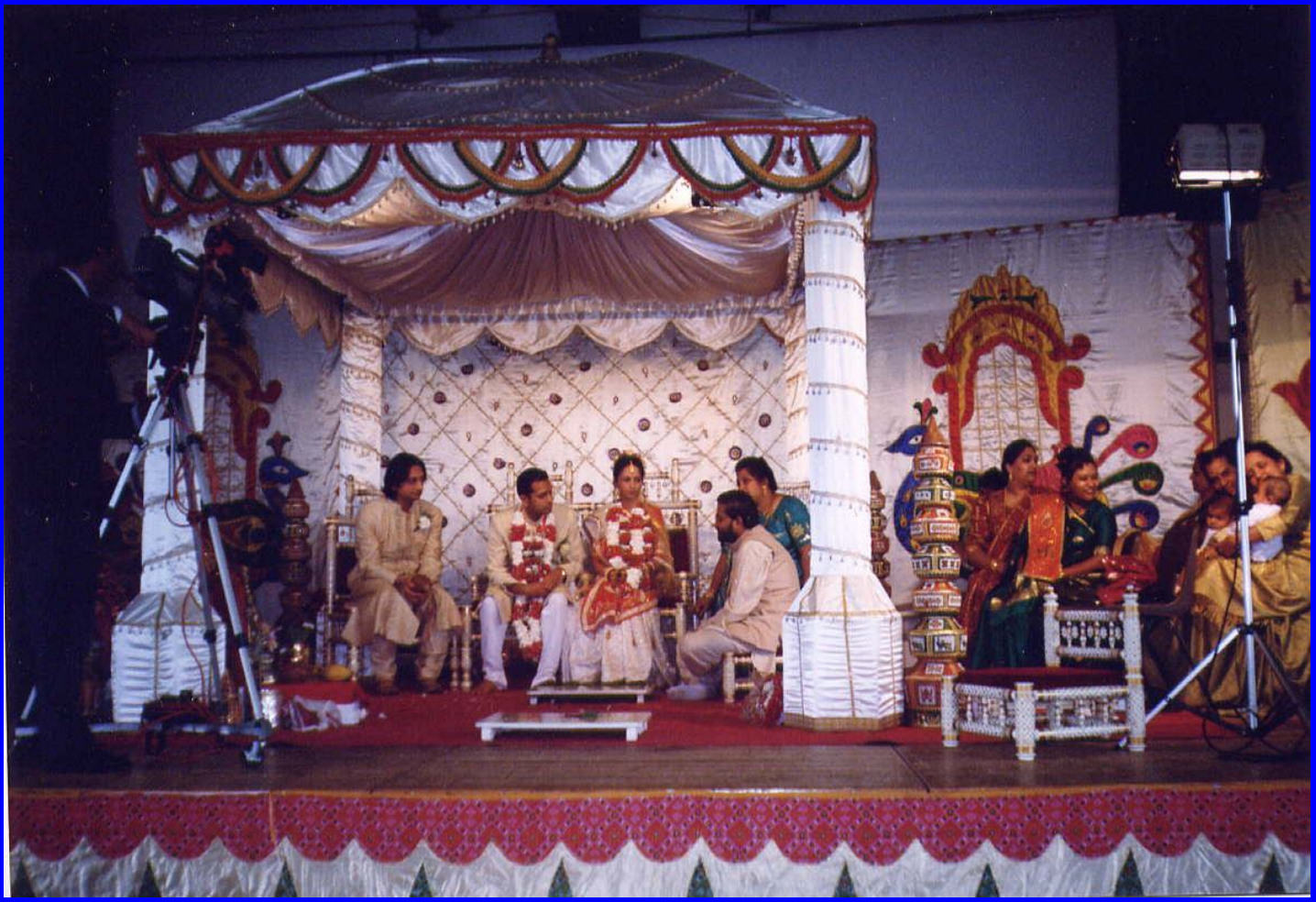
- Raw food is offered to the gods at the temple or family shrine and becomes '*prasad*'
- Once consumed by the family brings the energies into the bodies of the family
- Raw food is safer than cooked which might have been contaminated during or after cooking
- Many will fast once a week to purify the body
- Food used by the priests in larger rituals will be given to the poor

Food offered to the Goddess

Life-cycle Rituals-Continuity

- Weddings- joining of couple and 2 families- feed each other symbolising responsibilities
- Pregnancy -7 month- *kholo bharvo*-rice is exchanged by 2 grandmothers
- New baby 6 day ritual- *chhati* –offerings mug beans made to Goddess Randlama- future life
- Hair-cutting ritual –*balmovala*-birth hair put carefully in a flowing river- coconut, mug beans and rice from the wedding consumed

A Wedding Ceremony



Chhati- the six-day ceremony

Food conveys social messages

- In Gujarati culture, as in all other cultures
- Food tells us who we are as people
- Connects us with our history
- Links us with the supernatural
- Through pregnancy and breastfeeding the child learns about his/her world
- It conveys the code through which we live