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## FEASTS AND LABOR MOBILIZATION

## DISSECTING A FUNDAMENTAL ECONOMIC PRACTICE

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The use of feasts to mobilize collective labor has been a widespread and fundamental economic practice of societies around the world. In fact, variants of the practice are so strikingly omnipresent in the ethnographic and historical literature that a good case can be made for acknowledging it both as virtually a universal feature among agrarian societies (e.g., see Erasmus 1956; Moore 1975; Uchendu 1970) and as the nearly exclusive means of mobilizing large voluntary work projects before the spread of the monetary economy and the capitalist commoditization of labor and creation of a wage labor market.

This fact is of enormous potential significance to archaeologists in their attempts to understand ancient societies, particularly in terms of grappling with issues such as the role of labor control and exploitation in the development of

social inequality. However, the realization of that potential has been hampered by the lack of a fully theorized understanding of the specific range of practices that enable voluntary labor to be mobilized on a scale above the household level, how the possibility for labor exploitation inheres in some of these practices, and, crucially, the ways that feasting operates as a mechanism of conversion within this realm. Despite frequent programmatic statements by archaeologists about the importance of understanding the means of controlling labor (e.g., Webster 1990) and various attempts to do such things as quantify labor inputs in public projects (e.g., Renfrew 1973; Trigger 1990), little serious consideration actually has been given to developing a theoretical explanation of collective labor-mobilization practices other than slavery. However, we would argue that a nuanced understanding of the complex and intimate relationship between feasts and labor is crucial. That is because, although feasts have a nearly universal role in this domain among agrarian societies, this does not mean that they operate everywhere in exactly the same fashion or that they have the same potential for exploitation in all cases. Hence, the devotion of a chapter in this book to an explicit theoretical dissection of this fundamental issue.

The following discussion is based upon cross-cultural analysis of ethnographic cases derived from both the anthropological literature (especially building upon the seminal works of Erasmus 1956; Moore 1975; and Uchendu 1970) and our own ethnographic and historical research in western Kenya. We begin with an attempt to define a working vocabulary and a set of analytical concepts for exposing the relationship between feasts and labor and we propose a model of "collective work events" that serves as a basis for understanding both the "conversion" functions of feasts and their potential for exploitation. We then move from this more abstract discussion to some ethnographic examples that illustrate the points we develop. Finally, we explore the implications of this analysis for archaeology, and especially for the understanding of labor exploitation and the development of social inequality in ancient societies.

### COLLECTIVE WORK EVENTS (CWES)

*Work feast* is the term we use to describe a particular form of the "empowering feast" mode of commensal politics (see Dietler, Chapter 3) in which commensal hospitality is used to orchestrate voluntary collective labor. That is, the work feast is an event in which a group of people are called together to work on a specific project for a day (or more) and, in return, are treated to food and/or drink, after which the host owns the proceeds of the day's labor. The *work feast*, as the term is defined here, actually constitutes one pole in a range of labor-mobilization practices that we call *collective work events* (CWES). At the other pole of the CWE range is what we call the *work exchange* (see Fig. 9.1).<sup>1</sup>

Work Exchange	Work Feast
+ + +	-
>	Labor Reciprocity Obligations
-	+ + +
<	Temporal Finality of Exchange Transaction
-	+ + +
<	Lavishness of Hospitality
-	+ + +
<	Size of Work Group
-	+ + +
<	Social Distance of Labor Recruitment
-	+ + +
<	Potential for Exploitation

Figure 9.1. Schematic representation of Collective Work Events (CWEs) showing the correlated inverse-trend relationships among work-group size, the degree of reciprocal labor obligations, the scale of hospitality required, and the social distance of workers capable of being mobilized.

Several analytical points need to be established in order to understand the operation of CWEs. Most immediately, it must be emphasized that, from a comparative analytical perspective, work feasts and work exchanges are not binary oppositional categories, but rather terms used to describe polar tendencies along a continuum (Moore 1975). This continuum is defined by several factors (work-group size, reciprocal labor obligations, scale of hospitality, social distance of workers, etc.) that vary in a fairly predictable relationship to each other (see Fig. 9.1). Perhaps the most important defining characteristic is the inverse relationship between the degree of reciprocal labor obligation and the scale of hospitality required.

At the extreme *work-exchange* end of the scale, little if any food needs to be provided (often simply a little ordinary refreshment), but the moral obligations to reciprocate by participating in the work-exchange events of those who have participated in one's own event are very strong and explicit. This reciprocation may be either in person, or by sending a member of one's household as a substitute. At the extreme *work-feast* end of the scale, reciprocal labor obligations may be very weak (and vaguely implicit) to completely nonexistent, but the lavishness of the hospitality expected is quite significant.

In other words, crudely stated, the difference is basically one between an exchange of labor for labor versus and exchange of labor for hospitality. That is, work exchanges operate through a kind of delayed reciprocity, where the host of the event assumes a labor debt to all the participants that must be repaid at a later

date. Work feasts, on the other hand, operate more as a temporally finite exchange transaction: lavish hospitality is "exchanged" directly for labor, and no further obligations exist between host and guest. In some cases the event is at least partially acknowledged by the participants as a kind of exchange, and judgments about the quality and quantity of the beer and food provided affect the amount of work done and the size of the group that participates (e.g., see Barth 1967a; Colson 1949; Donham 1994; Goldschmidt 1976; Netting 1964; Saul 1983; Hunter 1961). However, as Karp has noted for the Iteso of East Africa, the participants do not necessarily consciously envisage this as an exchange transaction; instead, the feast may be seen simply as "the vehicle through which cooperation is achieved" (1980:88). In other words, labor relations are constituted through, and euphemized as, relations of commensality.

In work exchanges, the size of the work group able to be mobilized is limited to fairly small collectives of usually less than fifteen people; and these groups are very often organized through kinship or friendship networks (Erasmus 1956). As Moore (1975) has noted, the rather precisely and explicitly reckoned reciprocal labor obligations create certain scheduling constraints that both limit the size of the groups and generally result in one of two organizational arrangements for reciprocation. In what he calls the "individual exchange" pattern, individuals will participate in several different work-exchange networks, and will thus have multiple individual obligations with several other persons who will have their own sets of obligations that only partially intersect. In the "group exchange" pattern, a consistent group of individuals will work together in a consecutive circuit on the projects of each of its members. As Moore (1975) further noted, where institutionalized differences in social rank exist, recruitment to either of these kinds of work-exchange events is normally confined to individuals of comparable status with comparable landholdings to be worked.

With work feasts, on the other hand, labor can be mobilized on a much larger scale (up to several hundred people) and projects can be undertaken that would not be possible with work exchanges. Work feasts are also more effective at recruiting workers from a wider social radius, without reference to kinship, neighborhood affiliation, or social status. It is the scale of hospitality—the copiousness and quality of the drink and food provided (and the reputation of the host for providing these things in abundance)—that draws people to participate rather than close social relationships. Furthermore, work feasts are ad hoc events that are mounted for specific projects and they do not form part of a permanent cyclical organizational structure of labor relations. This means that, as noted, work feasts (of the ideal polar form) do not entail lingering obligations on the part of the host to participate in the work feasts of his or her guests, and this feature becomes even more marked as the size of the work feast expands (Erasmus 1956; Moore 1975).

One can actually distinguish two variants of the work feast, one voluntary and one obligatory. In the voluntary work feast, people are drawn to the event simply by the prior reputation of the host for providing lavish feasts. The obligatory form, which is often referred to as *corvée* labor, exists only where there is institutionalized central authority in the form of religious leaders, chiefs, kings, or other types of state apparatus. In these cases, people are drawn to participate because a ruler or public institution has the moral authority to require their presence as a form of labor tribute. However, as will be discussed in more detail later, rulers who fail to orchestrate *corvée* projects through the same work-feast idiom, by providing a generous quantity of food and drink for the workers, will soon meet grumbling and resistance. Rulers cannot rely on coercive force to motivate participation: any stable long-term system of labor tribute must rely on the continual production of consent—which means operating through and playing upon the same practices that have symbolic resonance within the population as a whole. Hence, there is very good reason to view *corvée* labor simply as a variant of the work feast in which the composition of the labor force is predetermined by an ideology of obligation and authority. In fact, approaching this relationship from the opposite direction, Bourdieu (1990:118) sees the voluntary work feast as simply “a covert exaction of *corvées*”—a perspective that will be better appreciated after the discussion of exploitation below.

A second important point that needs to be made about these CWE modes is that they are not mutually exclusive and it is not possible to characterize particular societies by one or the other of them. Rather, in most societies both modes will be employed in different contexts for different purposes. For example, work exchanges may be the normal pattern for small groups performing routine agricultural tasks (e.g., weeding, harvesting, field clearing, transport of crops from field to home), while work feasts will be employed for projects requiring a larger work group (e.g., house building and repair, fence or rampart construction, road building and repair, waterworks construction and maintenance, mining, agricultural work on very large plots of land, mounting trade expeditions) or one convened for an urgent task. Moreover, within given local contexts, these different forms of CWE are often categorically marked; that is, many societies distinguish different kinds of CWE by name and conceptualize them as distinct categories (see below). In other cases, the differences are more clinal than categorical (e.g., see Chibnik and de Jong 1990; Saul 1983).

Another important related point that needs to be established is that the specific forms of CWE found in real ethnographic contexts do not necessarily closely approach the polar extreme versions used here to define the abstract analytical continuum. Nor need there be only two categories. In other words, a local version of what would be classified as a work feast on our abstract comparative scale might

still involve some implicit reciprocal labor obligations (often only for participating kin); and, in the opposite direction, there might well be several categories within the work-exchange end of the continuum with decreasing hospitality obligations and decreasing size. For example, the Maale of Ethiopia have three categories of CWE: the *dabo*, the *mol?o*, and the *helma*. The *dabo* is a moderately large (up to thirty people) ad hoc work feast of variable participation at which the provision of much beer is mandatory and the quantity of beer determines the length of the workday, but at which the host also acquires some implicit reciprocal work obligations. The *mol?o* is a large (between about six and fifteen people) rotating work exchange with a formal organization and durable composition at which some beer is usually provided (but is not obligatory). The *helma* is a very small work exchange (three to four people) following a fixed cycle of rotation at which beer is not necessary; but some beer will be served if one wants the work to extend beyond the standard half day (Donham 1994; cf. Barth 1967a; Mayer 1951; Nadel 1942:248–251; Tosh 1978:41 for a range of different local classifications).

Hence, from an analytical perspective, it is important to recognize that such culturally specific forms of CWE may be located at various points along the abstract continuum according to local expectations about the relative degree of labor reciprocity obligations and scale of requisite hospitality. Moreover, in a given society, there may be no forms that closely approximate the polar extremes. As will be discussed later, this fact has important implications for understanding the potential of these practices for labor exploitation. However, for the moment, let us simply establish the semantic point that, in applying a term such as *work feast* to empirical ethnographic or archaeological cases, we are merely signifying those arrangements that tend toward the work-feast end of the abstract analytical continuum of CWEs.

It should additionally be noted that CWEs are used to congregate groups of workers performing identical tasks of a relatively unskilled nature. They are useful in contexts where the simple multiplication of the number of hands brought to bear on a task is effective in reducing the time of completion or in enabling certain feats (such as the movement of heavy objects or the construction of large structures) that could not be accomplished by members of a household alone. Tasks for which the specialized skills of an individual are more important than the multiplication of the number of workers are accomplished through other means. The example discussed later of iron working among the Samia of Kenya nicely illustrates this distinction by contrasting the mining of ore through work feasts with the compensation of smiths through payment with a part of their production (although, of course, such specialists may also be treated to some commensal hospitality). Another related feature of CWEs commented upon in many ethnographic contexts (e.g., Barth 1967a; Donham 1994; Kennedy 1978) is

that the quality of work performed at work feasts is generally less good than at work exchanges, and the quality often gets worse as the size of the feast expands. This is frequently due in part to the effects of the alcohol that often accompanies the work at work feasts. However, it also stems from the different sense of reciprocal obligation that attaches to small work exchanges, as well as the increasing difficulties of supervision with increasing size.

As a final preliminary observation, it should be noted that, contrary to older conceptions of an idealized "domestic mode of production" composed of self-contained household production and consumption units, CWEs are fundamental to the operation of the agrarian economy because they mobilize the essential interhousehold communal labor flows that, in fact, sustain domestic units (see Donham 1994). Moreover, work feasts, in particular, are extremely important in the political economy because of the context they provide for the acquisition and conversion of symbolic and economic capital (to employ Bourdieu's [1990:117–119] useful terminology). In the first place, as with all other types of feast, they provide an opportunity to make public statements about prestige and acquire symbolic capital (Chapter 3). It should not be forgotten that, for the participants, a lavish work feast is, above all else, a festive social occasion (rather than simply a day of wage labor). Such an event not only mobilizes labor: it augments the reputation of the host for generous hospitality in the same way that, for example, hosting a large marriage ceremony or sponsoring a communal ritual does (e.g., see Chibnik and de Jong 1990; Colson and Scudder 1988:77; Kennedy 1978). However, its peculiar characteristic among feasts in general is that it *simultaneously* provides a means of harnessing the labor of others in order to acquire economic capital that subsequently can be converted to additional symbolic capital by several other means. As will be explained below, work feasts, in effect, act as a mechanism of indirect conversion between spheres of exchange in multi-centric economies and thereby provide a potential catalyst for increasing inequality in social relations.

### WORK FEASTS IN ETHNOGRAPHIC CONTEXTS

At this stage, it is necessary to ground this schematic discussion of collective work events, especially work feasts, in some brief ethnographic examples in order both to give a sense of the everyday lived experience behind these abstract concepts and to expand upon the theoretical points made.

The importance and ubiquity of work feasts can hardly be doubted by anyone familiar with the ethnographic and historical literature.<sup>2</sup> In fact, work feasts have been such a common feature of agrarian societies that they have often been taken for granted as part of the expected cultural background—a self-evident feature mentioned in a various passages but not singled out for detailed analysis (with

some fortunate exceptions). However, even some of the briefer analyses are quite revealing. Goldschmidt, for example, wrote of the *mayket* work feast of the Sebei of East Africa that "no institution is so central to modern Sebei life" (1976:156); and among the Kofyar of Nigeria, the concept of God is even phrased in terms of a wealthy farmer who distributes beer in return for labor (Netting 1964).

As noted earlier, work feasts were, and are, used to perform a wide variety of tasks for which the sheer multiplication of hands either allows a project to be done in a short space of time or enables a project that could not be undertaken otherwise. Most often these include agricultural tasks and construction or maintenance/repair projects, but such things as the organization of game drives, mining, and trade expeditions are also recorded. For example, the genesis of the extensive trading network of the Kamba of Kenya was due in large measure to the innovative adaptation of the traditional *mwethya* work-feast system to organize transport (Cummings 1976:92–93).

What is more, the motivational effectiveness of CWEs in inducing people to participate in working together is evident in the fact that, despite some obviously important effects on such practices stemming from the spread of wage labor and the transformation of labor into a marketable commodity under colonial regimes, work feasts and work exchanges have continued to persist alongside wage labor in many areas (Colson and Scudder 1988; Erasmus 1956; Moore 1975; Saul 1983). Indeed, during the colonial period, long after many other elements in an indigenous economy had been accepted as commodities with a monetary value, there often persisted a lingering negative feeling about exchanging labor for money (as also was the case with land). Barth (1967a), for example, noted that among the Fur of the Sudan, government workers were for some time unsuccessful in recruiting local workers by offering money wages—even when those wages were calculated to be twelve times the value of the millet beer demanded by an individual in the context of a work feast. Similarly, on Samoa and in the Cook Islands of the Pacific, Lemert (1979) noted that natives could not be recruited for agricultural work on plantations by offering money; only the promise of *mea miti* ("something to sip": i.e., several bottles of drink for a feast after the work is done) would provide a sufficient incentive.

Hunter's description of work feasts (*amalima*, singular: *ilima*) among the Pondo of South Africa nicely illustrates and highlights several of the typical features noted in the earlier discussion. These *amalima* can mobilize up to two hundred people for a particular task. Word is spread by telling the neighbors that an *ilima* will be held in a particular field on a given day, and the news quickly spreads through the district by word of mouth. There is no obligation for anyone to participate, but people are drawn by the prospect of the feast. Moreover, there is a hierarchy of preference between beer feasts and meat feasts:

an *ilima* with beer always draws more than an *ilima* with meat . . . It is known and discussed in the community beforehand how many barrels [of beer] have been prepared, and so the number of people is in some ways commensurate with the amount of beer provided, but other considerations such as the scarcity of beer at the time, the number of other festivities on, the occupation of people with their own lands, and the reputation of the owner of the *ilima* for generosity, or stinginess, affect the number attending. (Hunter 1961:89)

As Hunter describes one such event:

At one *ilima* to take mealies off the cob, five barrels of beer were provided and an average of forty people were present at one time, the number of men and women being about equal. People came and went, assisting in the work for as long as they stayed. Beer was passed round at intervals, so the amount they got depended upon the length of time they stayed. (1961:89)

As she further noted, people work hard at such events, but they come to them because they enjoy participating: "An *ilima* is a party. The crowd of people, the mixing of the sexes, and the refreshments, give even to hard work the atmosphere of play. There is conversation, and songs, and flirting" (1961:90). This means also that "Usually an *ilima* gets through a considerable amount of work, but the quality of the work, particularly in a weeding party, is apt to be poor" (1961:90).

Bohannan and Bohannan (1968) provide another illuminating description of a work feast among the Tiv of Nigeria:

The biggest [yam-] mounding party we saw was called by a man of about forty-five, Yilaun of MbaDuku/MbaYar. He called his best friend from the neighboring lineage . . . who gathered about twenty of his own agnatic kinsmen about him and came to MbaDuku late one evening. They brought drums and hoes, a hurricane lamp, and their best clothes. They danced at several compounds along the way, to songs composed for the occasion and to well-known work songs. When they got to Yilaun's compound, they danced until about 1:00 A.M. They began work the next morning at daybreak. This group was joined by Yilaun's agnatic kinsmen: all the agnatic descendants of his father's father, and a few youths with more attenuated agnatic links. Drawn by dancing and the promise of rich food, several young men of Yilaun's mother's lineage came, and two of his wives' brothers also arrived.

This group made yam mounds at a feverish pitch for about four hours. They were then given food, prepared and brought to the fields by all of the women of Yilaun's compound. They ate in groups of about half a dozen; each group was given a huge calabash of yam porridge with three different sauces. There was so much food they could not eat it all. Work was suspended during the heat of the day. They began again about four in the afternoon and worked until dark, and were fed again. That night they danced until well after midnight. The next day the procedure was repeated, and all the farms of Yilaun's compound were finished. That night they

began the biggest dance of all: Yilaun furnished pot after pot of millet beer and killed two small goats. They again danced far into the night, and the next day danced for almost two hours at the local market. (Bohannan and Bohannan 1968:73-74)

By hosting this large work feast, Yilaun was actually able to use this labor to expand his farmland into disputed territory in a region where land was becoming increasingly scarce. "In addition, Yilaun reaped great prestige from his lavish treatment of the relatives of his best friend: during the dancing at the market place, his name was on the lips of all" (Bohannan and Bohannan 1968:74).

As pointed out earlier, *corvée* labor also is generally organized through the idiom of the work feast (e.g., see Dillon 1990:129; Goody 1982:67; Richards 1939; Washburne 1961:140). In making this generalizing observation, there is, of course, some potential danger in using cases from colonial contexts because in many instances "chiefs" were created by decree in societies where they did not previously exist (e.g., see Chapter 3). Hence, such neo-chiefs may simply have continued the labor-mobilization practices used by wealthy influential men who did not previously have the authority to command labor tribute. However, this danger is mitigated by the fact that even cases with long-established kingdoms seem to follow this pattern. As noted earlier, Bourdieu (1990:118) considers the voluntary work feast as simply a camouflaged version of *corvée*. While this statement obscures important distinctions within the range of events that constitute work feasts (outlined in the initial discussion of CWEs), it does quite correctly point to the potential for *some* work feasts to develop into a mechanism of labor exploitation.

### SAMIA WORK FEASTS AND THE ISSUE OF LABOR EXPLOITATION

Let us now turn to a brief consideration of an ethnohistorical study on precolonial iron production conducted among the Samia people in western Kenya as a means of focusing particularly upon this issue of labor exploitation and exploring the closely related conversion function of the work feast.<sup>3</sup> The Samia are an agrarian society with a traditionally acephalous form of political organization. They speak a language of the Bantu family and are neighbors of the Nilotic-speaking Luo living north of the Winam Gulf in the northeast corner of Lake Victoria. Until the influx of European industrially produced iron in the 1920s, all of the iron used over a several-thousand-square-kilometer area encompassing both Samia and large parts of the neighboring Luo territory was derived from a single ore source in the Samia hills. This source, composed of hematite deposits in pockets of about 7 meters thickness, constitutes the richest iron ore source in Kenya (Brown 1995:43). The importance of the precolonial exploitation of these

deposits is reflected in both the considerable quantities of iron slag found at the base of the hills and in the Luo name for the principal object produced from this ore, a large iron hoe blade called *Kwer Nyagot*, or "Hoe, Daughter of the Hills" (Fig. 9.2). The production of these hoes was based upon a system fueled by large work feasts, which was an elaborated version of the same mechanism used to mobilize labor for a variety of other projects. A wealthy man (that is, one with a large number of wives capable of raising a copious supply of millet, brewing it into beer, and preparing a generous supply of food) would call together all the willing men of the area on a given day to mine ore from the Samia hills. There was no obligation to participate, but men were drawn to do so by the prior reputation of the host for generous hospitality. After spending the day gathering ore, these men were treated to a great feast, after which they would return home and the host was left with a large supply of iron ore. No further compensation was required, and the host was considered to own the proceeds of the day's labor. A smelter and a smith were then called to convert the ore first into blooms and then into hoes, respectively. Each of these craftsmen was compensated for his labor by being given some of the hoes produced from the ore.

These hoes, some of which still survive as heirlooms in Luo and Samia homes, were extremely valuable. Although used for utilitarian agricultural purposes, they formed part of a prestige sphere of exchange in a multi-centric economy: their acquisition required the giving of livestock and they were even used along with cattle as bridewealth in marriage transactions. So important were they to the neighboring Luo that Samia travelers were exempt from attack for fear of en-

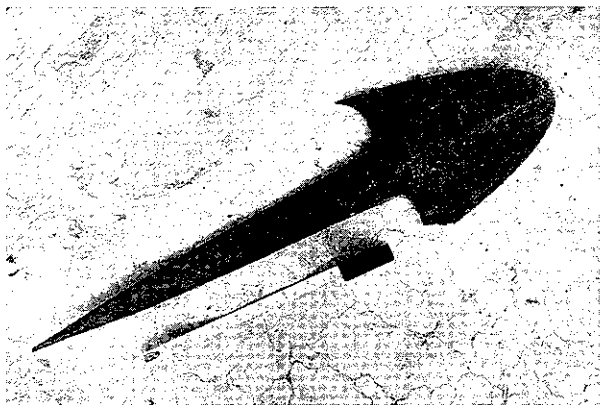


Figure 9.2. Iron hoe blade (length = 56 cm) from the precolonial era in western Kenya. These hoe blades were made in the Samia Hills and exchanged widely throughout the region. They could be used as bridewealth and to exchange for livestock. (Photo by M. Dietler and I. Herbich)

dangerous exchange links, and giving a daughter to be married to a Samia man was considered highly desirable because of the exchange relationships it engendered. Furthermore, the still iron-rich slag (the smelting process was not very efficient) was often collected by those Samia who could not manage to host mining work feasts on their own, and small chunks of iron were hoarded until there was enough to make a hoe.

While this work-feast method of engaging in iron production was, in principle, open to all Samia men, in practical terms its effective manipulation was limited to those wealthy enough to provide sufficiently large feasts to mobilize large work groups. As noted elsewhere (Chapter 3), the agricultural and culinary labor required for such an event is formidable, and in Samia and Luo societies this required many wives. However, acquiring wives required the accumulation of wealth (i.e., cattle and iron hoes) for bridewealth. Moreover, there is an obvious link between subsistence production, marriage, and iron production that would insure that an initial position of advantage in access to this process would tend to have a spiraling effect in augmenting wealth and prestige (see Fig. 9.3). That is, wealth in cattle was necessary for the bridewealth to obtain the multiple wives whose labor could produce a large feast. But once achieved, the hoes gained through the institution of the work feast could be used to obtain more wives (through conversion to stock used as bridewealth or used directly in marriage transactions); and the increased productive capacity represented by these women could be used to more effectively and frequently amass the supplies for a large feast and engage again in iron production. Those men without the initial "capital" (in terms of cattle, crops, and wives) to produce a large feast were effectively excluded from the cycle and were reduced to being regular guests/workers at the work feasts of the wealthy.

This example serves to illustrate how feasts may act as a means of indirect conversion between spheres of exchange (or regimes of value) in a multi-centric economy (Fig. 9.4). Such economies, in which different classes of goods circulated in separate exchange regimes (of variable number and kind depending upon the culture) and in which there were strong moral sanctions against converting between the spheres, were a very common feature of pre-monetary economic systems that did not have a uniform and universal scale of value (Barth 1967a; Bohannan 1955; Piot 1991; Salisbury 1962); indeed, Kopytoff (1986) sees them as a universal feature, even in the Western capitalist context. In pre-monetized western Kenya, for example, one could exchange grain for pots or a range of other craft items and agricultural produce. However, grain was so low on the scale of value that no one would be willing to accept even a huge quantity of it in direct exchange for prestige-sphere goods (except, perhaps, during a famine); yet its conversion into beer and food in the context of a feast was a prime means of

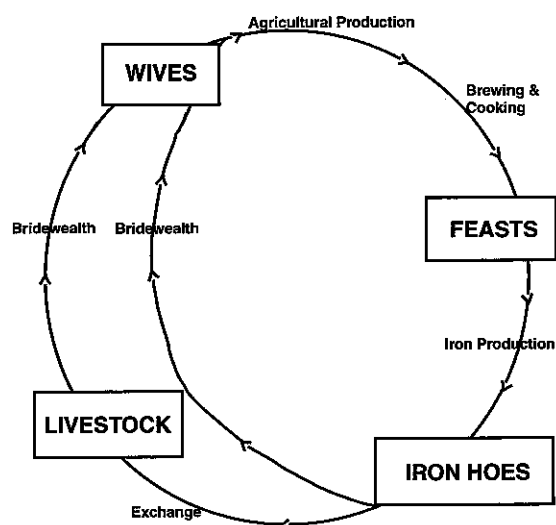


Figure 9.3. Schematic representation of the link between subsistence production, marriage, and iron production in Samia society showing how an initial position of advantage in access to this process would tend to have a spiraling effect in augmenting wealth and prestige.

both acquiring prestige and mobilizing the labor by which prestige-sphere exchange objects could ultimately be obtained. A ritual form of commensal hospitality (the work feast) was able to perform the apparently impossible function of converting lowly grain into valuables and prestige, of linking separate spheres of exchange via an indirect route involving the mobilization of labor (both culinary and productive).

The Samia example also demonstrates the way in which work feasts serve as a conduit for reciprocal conversions of what Bourdieu (1990) calls economic and symbolic capital.<sup>4</sup> People are drawn to participate in such events by the reputation of the host for generous hospitality. This reputation is an aspect of symbolic capital acquired through the expenditure of material capital in previous feasts. But through the institution of the work feast, this symbolic capital is used to harness the labor of others for the acquisition of further material capital, while at the same time augmenting the symbolic capital of the host by generating further prestige and embellishing his reputation for generosity.

Finally, this example also illustrates how the manipulation of this practice can sometimes lead to increasing social and economic inequality even in the context of ideologically egalitarian precapitalist societies. When one segment of a community becomes adept at managing this entrepreneurial device and begins to act consistently as hosts of large work feasts while others find themselves continually serving as guests/workers, then one has the beginnings of a pattern of labor ex-

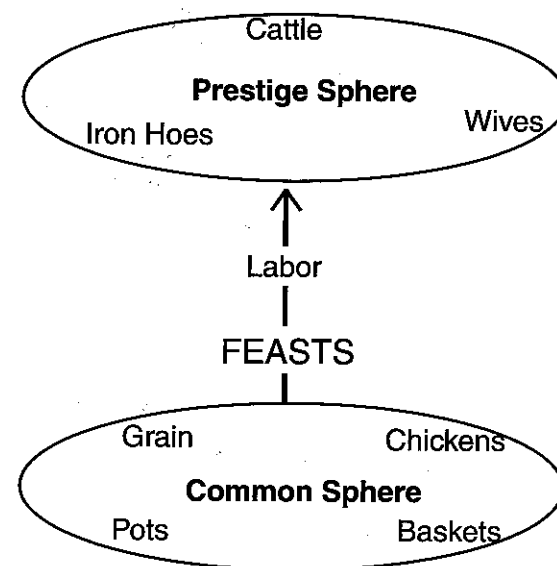


Figure 9.4. Schematic representation of the role of feasts as a privileged mechanism of indirect conversion between spheres of exchange in a multi-centric economy. This is a highly simplified rendition of one possible set of spheres of exchange; comparative ethnographic surveys show many possible permutations of numbers of spheres and valuations of objects.

ploitation by which some individuals or groups are able to dominate the system and extract wealth and prestige from the labor of others.

Barth (1967a, 1967b) noted a similar potential for "growth spirals" among the mountain Fur villages of the Sudan. There the people of the village had gradually separated into two strata: a moderately prosperous group of work-feast hosts and a less fortunate fraction who, through their frequent participation as guest/workers at the feasts of others, effectively formed a labor reserve for the more wealthy. Some of the wealthy individuals had even begun to further augment their relative advantage by expanding the use of work feasts to enter the cash-crop market.

Similarly, among the Tarahumara of Mexico, Kennedy (1978:86) noted that wealthier men were able to give more frequent and more lavish *tesquínadas* (work feasts fueled with maize beer), and thereby to gain the labor necessary to maintain larger areas under cultivation. This allowed them not only to hold more beer feasts, but also to amass surplus maize for distribution to others in times of famine. Both of these things generated considerable symbolic capital. As he noted, the beer feast operates as a "prestige showcase" that serves "the important function of publicizing rank and power," and this feature was even more marked during the lean season before the next harvest (Kennedy 1978:118).

A similar situation was noted among the Maale of Ethiopia by Donham (1994:146–152). He calculated that in one context about two thirds of the net surplus of work-feast labor that richer villagers enjoyed came from people in the poorest categories of the village hierarchy. These were households that, on average, sponsored no work feasts at all during the entire period of his fieldwork. Moreover, what he identified as “middle villagers” (i.e., those in the middle economic stratum) on average enjoyed a small net surplus of work-feast labor, but “still showed a negative deficit in cooperation with richer villagers” (Donham 1994:148).

Hence, a potential for labor exploitation clearly inheres in some forms of the work feast. But a marked pattern of exploitation is by no means a universal result of the operation of work feasts; nor do all exploitative forms necessarily result in escalating inequalities.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, it is important to ask what conditions favor the development of such an asymmetrical pattern and what kinds of constraints might inhibit its spiraling expansion?

One immediate potential constraint stems from certain specific organizational arrangements of the relationship between workers and food providers. In some contexts, certain public projects may be undertaken by groups of people who share not only the work but also the provisioning of the feast. For example, among the Wamira of Papua New Guinea, Kahn (1998) notes that all men must work together to construct and periodically clear out common irrigation canals. This involves work feasts of perhaps thirty men for which food is supplied jointly by the wives of all the men. Hence, a potential for exploitation depends upon the existence of work feasts hosted by individual households, or at least by a group smaller than the collection of assembled workers/guests. Given this arrangement, Barth (1967a) located another potential brake on the system in the fact that the quality and productivity of the workforce tends to deteriorate as the group expands. As noted earlier, this feature has very frequently been remarked upon in other cases (e.g., Donham 1994; Kennedy 1978). While this may constrain the size of individual work feasts, it does not explain limitations on the expansion of the system. However, more important constraints are imposed by the cultural definition of the transaction that constitutes a work feast.

What becomes immediately clear is that those events which, by local cultural convention, conform most closely to the extreme work feast pole of the continuum of CWE possibilities are the most susceptible to exploitation. This is because the event is treated by the participants as a finite exchange transaction where lavishness of hospitality replaces any delayed obligations for reciprocal labor. Hence, the host is not limited by the time and energy constraints of taking on multiple labor-debt obligations. Moreover, this form of work feast comes closest to the concept of a labor market, while at the same time the fact that the ex-

change is orchestrated through a ritual of commensal hospitality subtly serves to euphemize the nature of the transaction—the exchange is represented as an act of generosity and made palatable even in societies with a strongly egalitarian ethos. Finally, the fact that recruitment of the labor pool may expand well beyond very local kin and friendship networks means that, even in those cases where some weak and implicit labor obligations might accrue, the transaction occurs between the host and a large number of individuals who are not already linked by close social relationships and who stand outside the moral community within which such obligations might be recognized (see Sahlins 1972).

As the culturally construed proper form of the work feast is located farther away from the polar type (hence as reciprocal labor obligations increase and are more explicitly and precisely calculated), such asymmetrical exploitation becomes more difficult. The accruing labor obligations restrict the future activities of the host and the size of the work group that can be assembled through a work feast. As noted earlier, the precise location on the CWE continuum of a given local version of the work feast is determined by local cultural conceptions. This can, of course, shift over time as practice responds to changing problems and historical contexts. But what is important to note is that a potential for exploitation is inherent in the upper range of the work-feast end of the continuum. This potential can be powerfully magnified through certain linkages—when work feasts are used to produce goods or materials that can be employed in external exchange circuits to increase economic and symbolic capital (for example in the case of producing iron hoes for cattle exchanges, or the use of work feasts to produce cash crops).

It is also necessary to briefly discuss another form of labor exploitation that is a more variable aspect of work feasts—that is, an intrahousehold one based upon gender. In very many cases, it is women who constitute the productive base for the agricultural and culinary labor that underwrites the operation of work feasts, yet have little or no claim to the benefits of the event (except indirectly, as members of the household). For example, in the Samia case discussed earlier, it was the multiple wives of a wealthy man who provided the crops and the culinary labor necessary to produce a feast. Yet it was largely the husband who benefited from the mining labor organized through the feast—both in terms of the prestige generated and the subsequent use of the iron hoes (for the acquisition of cattle and more wives). Hence, there was a double system of exploitation in operation. A similar pattern of the gendered division of labor is found in many agrarian societies, especially in Africa (e.g., see Clark 1980; Geschire 1982). This is, in fact, one of the attractions of polygyny and one reason that wealthy men and chiefs in patrilineal polygynous societies tend to have many more wives than other men.



It would be misleading, however, to suggest that this is a universal pattern of exploitation. In the first place, there are many cases in which men are responsible for agricultural production and, perhaps more rarely, culinary labor for their own feasts. There are also cases in which the division of agricultural labor is more balanced, and gendered patterns of crop ownership and responsibilities can, in fact, be rather complicated (e.g., see Barth 1967a:151). Moreover, in some instances women are capable of mounting work feasts on their own and have proprietary rights over the proceeds of the event. It is very common that women organize work exchanges, but somewhat less common that they are the official hosts of work feasts, especially the larger types. However, it does happen in some contexts. Moreover, CWEs of various types can be turned to novel uses that actually give women the possibility for increased economic independence and power: among the Luo of Kenya, for example, during the 1980s women began to expand the traditional work exchanges for agricultural tasks into new kinds of cooperative work-exchange associations (among some potters, for example) that enabled them to pool resources, build collective capital, and ameliorate individual risk (see Herbich and Dietler 1989). Hence, work feasts and other CWEs cannot automatically be viewed simply as a mechanism of gendered exploitation of labor. However, one can observe that gendered exploitation, where it exists, does tend to involve exploitation of female labor, whereas an inverse pattern (that is, in which men provide the bulk of the agricultural and culinary labor that supports women's work feasts) is rather rarer. It is extremely important to recognize the potential permutations of these various intersecting patterns of exploitation in understanding the labor-mobilization practices of a given society and their potential for creating and transforming structures of inequality.

## CONCLUSION

As archaeologists become increasingly interested in pursuing questions concerning the transformation of social relations, the organization and institutional setting of labor is a topic that demands to be explored in much greater depth. In particular, it is extremely important to develop a theoretical understanding of the practices that enable the mobilization of voluntary collective labor.

Archaeologists have expended a good deal of energy attempting to identify, classify, and understand "craft specialists" and systems of "specialized production" (e.g., Childe 1936; Clark 1995; Clark and Parry 1990; Costin 1991; Herbich 1987; Peacock 1982). However, they have been far less engaged with exploring the forms of collective labor (voluntary and involuntary) that underlie in a more fundamental way the operation of the agrarian political economy. Within the fields of history and anthropology there exists a considerable literature analyzing forms of involuntary labor classified under the rubric of "slavery" (e.g., Finley

1985; Garlan 1988; Kopytoff 1982; Meillassoux 1991; Miers and Kopytoff 1977); although, to date, this has been of far less concern to archaeologists. The major exception to this pattern of neglect has been archaeologists working on the highly idiosyncratic form of slavery found on the plantations of North America (see Singleton 1995), although scholars working in a few other regions have also made important contributions (e.g., Arnold 1988; Daubigney 1983; Peschel 1971).

This chapter has attempted to focus an analytical lens on the even less well explored, yet extremely important, process of voluntary collective labor mobilization. A theoretical understanding of such labor-mobilization practices is crucial to archaeologists for several reasons. In the first place, a fuller awareness of the range and operation of such practices exposes the inadequacies of assumptions that have guided archaeological interpretation in the past, such as simplistic correlations between the existence of large-scale earthworks and the necessity of centralized political organization. The idea that such projects must be the result of tributary *corvée* labor is simply not warranted, as it is clear that work feasts can mobilize voluntary work groups on a similar scale for similar kinds of projects. Indeed, it should be evident at this point that *corvée* labor can only be understood when it is properly situated in the context of the full range of voluntary "collective work events" because it operates as a kind of variant of the work feast. Even large state-directed projects, at least those that depend upon the labor of free subjects rather than slaves, will usually take the organizational form of work feasts.

A theoretical dissection of work feasts also reveals how they serve the important role of operating as mechanisms of conversion between economic and symbolic capital. Like other feasts, they convert agricultural produce into immediate prestige for the host. However, they also have the advantage of simultaneously harnessing labor that can be used to generate further materials for future feast events or to produce goods that can be used to acquire other forms of symbolic capital or enlarge the household productive base (e.g., through marriage transactions). As explained earlier, this is an extremely important function of indirect conversion in premonetary multi-centric economies where there are moral sanctions against direct conversions between spheres of exchange. It is important precisely because it allows goods of little value to be used to create and acquire valuables and prestige. It provides a venue for building a career through strategic "investment."

Such an exploration of CWEs also exposes the potential that exists for some forms of work feast to enable the increasing exploitation of labor even in the context of societies with an egalitarian political ethos. Regardless of the formal ideology of a society, large work feasts that are viewed as a finite exchange transaction with no reciprocal labor obligations can result, in the course of practice, in asymmetrical labor flows, such that some individuals or households de-

rive wealth and prestige from the labor of others. This fact has profound significance for the long-term development of social relations and economic structures. Obviously, it also has crucial implications for archaeologists attempting to understand the development and exacerbation of conditions of social inequality. Finally, it dramatically underscores yet one more reason why it is essential for archaeologists to recognize the importance of feasts in social life.

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## NOTES

1. The distinction between "work feasts" and "work exchanges" corresponds approximately to categories with slightly different names developed in several earlier comparative analyses of collective labor practices. For example, Erasmus (1956) denoted these practices with the terms "festive labor" and "exchange labor," respectively; whereas Moore (1975) called them "non-reciprocal co-operative labour" and "reciprocal co-operative labour." While owing an obvious major debt to these seminal works, we employ an alternative terminology in order to signify a particular analytical focus on the role of the feast event in orchestrating labor projects and to mark certain subtle differences from these earlier works.
2. Work feasts were/are found from Africa to Latin America, from the Caribbean to Asia, from European peasants to North American colonists and their barn-raising. In addition to the works cited elsewhere in this text, see, for example, Cancian 1972; Eguchi 1975; Guillet 1980; Herskovits 1937:70-76; Kahn 1998; Kenyatta 1938:59-60; Lomnitz 1976:183; March 1998; Moerman 1968; Provinse 1937; Salisbury 1962. This is, of course, merely a minuscule sample cited in order to suggest the geographical extent of the practice.
3. All unreferenced descriptions of practices among the Luo and Samia peoples in this paper are derived from research conducted by us in western Kenya from 1980 to 1983 (see, e.g., Dietler and Herbich 1993; Herbich 1987, 1991; Herbich and Dietler 1991, 1993).
4. Bourdieu's (1990) *The Logic of Practice* is a theoretical reformulation of concepts, such as symbolic capital, presented earlier in his (1978) *Outline of a Theory of Practice*.

Although the latter text is better known in the Anglophone anthropological community, it has been largely superseded by the later work. The adoption of Bourdieu's metaphorical use of "capital" to translate various forms of socially constructed power poses certain dangers—not least the fact that it may be easily misconstrued as advocating an extension of the simplistic and inappropriate neoclassical economic perspective to the analysis of social and cultural phenomena or as naturalizing the cultural logic of capitalism. Hence, although we have certain misgivings, the term *symbolic capital* is used here largely because it is the most useful trope we have found for illuminating the operation of the work feast. However, we issue the caution that it is used in the specific sense stemming from Bourdieu's theoretical program for the analysis of symbolic domination, and not in a neoclassical economics sense or rational actor theory sense.

5. For example, Donham (1994:146-152) provides an example of two very different patterns in the same society in Ethiopia. The Bola faction had a classic pattern of labor exploitation by the wealthy as described earlier. However, among the Dofu group, there was a very different flow of work-feast labor due to the influence of a political struggle by elders attempting to preserve their factional position. In this case, with a few exceptions, the most politically influential households had deficits of labor flows in work feasts and there was a net transfer of labor from elders' households to middle-aged men's households (the elders sent younger members of their very large households to the work feasts of junior men rather than coming themselves). In this case, "elders appeared to be transferring labor to middle-aged men in return for support and deference" (Donham 1994:151).

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